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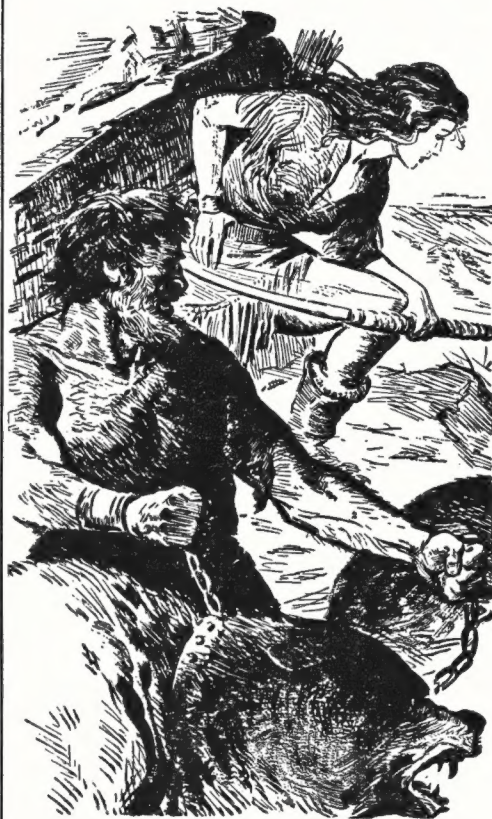
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# ACTION STORIES

T. T. SCOTT, President

MALCOLM REISS, Gen'l Mgr. & Editor

**"YORE NAME'S ON A HUNDRED BULLETS!"** . Thomas Thompson 4

Full-length Novel of the great Southwest

A blood-crazed mob moved into the California hills. Eyes blazing, knives honed, guns lead-heavy, they swore screaming agony and slow-death—for a weaponless girl who cowered wild-eyed in the brush.

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A Senorita Scorpion Novel

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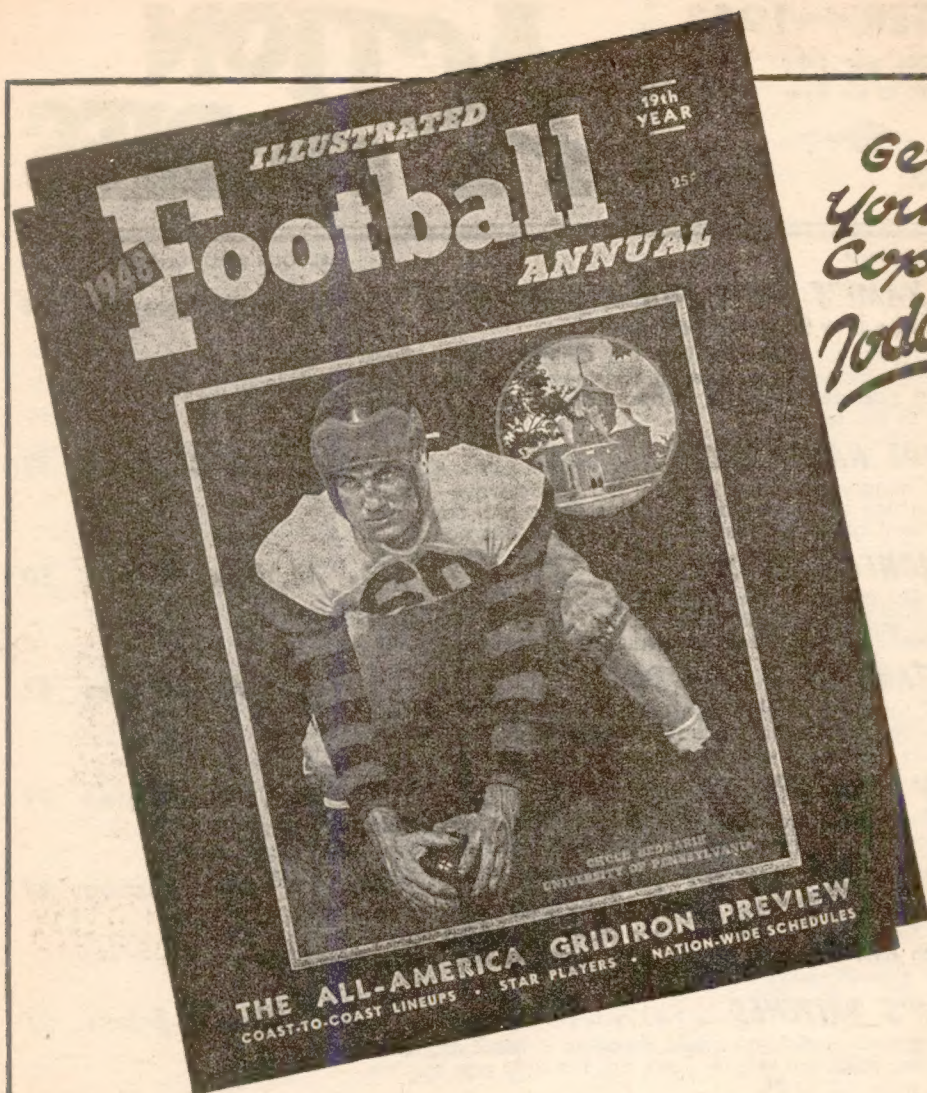


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# "Yore Name's On A Hundred Bullets!"

*By Thomas Thompson*

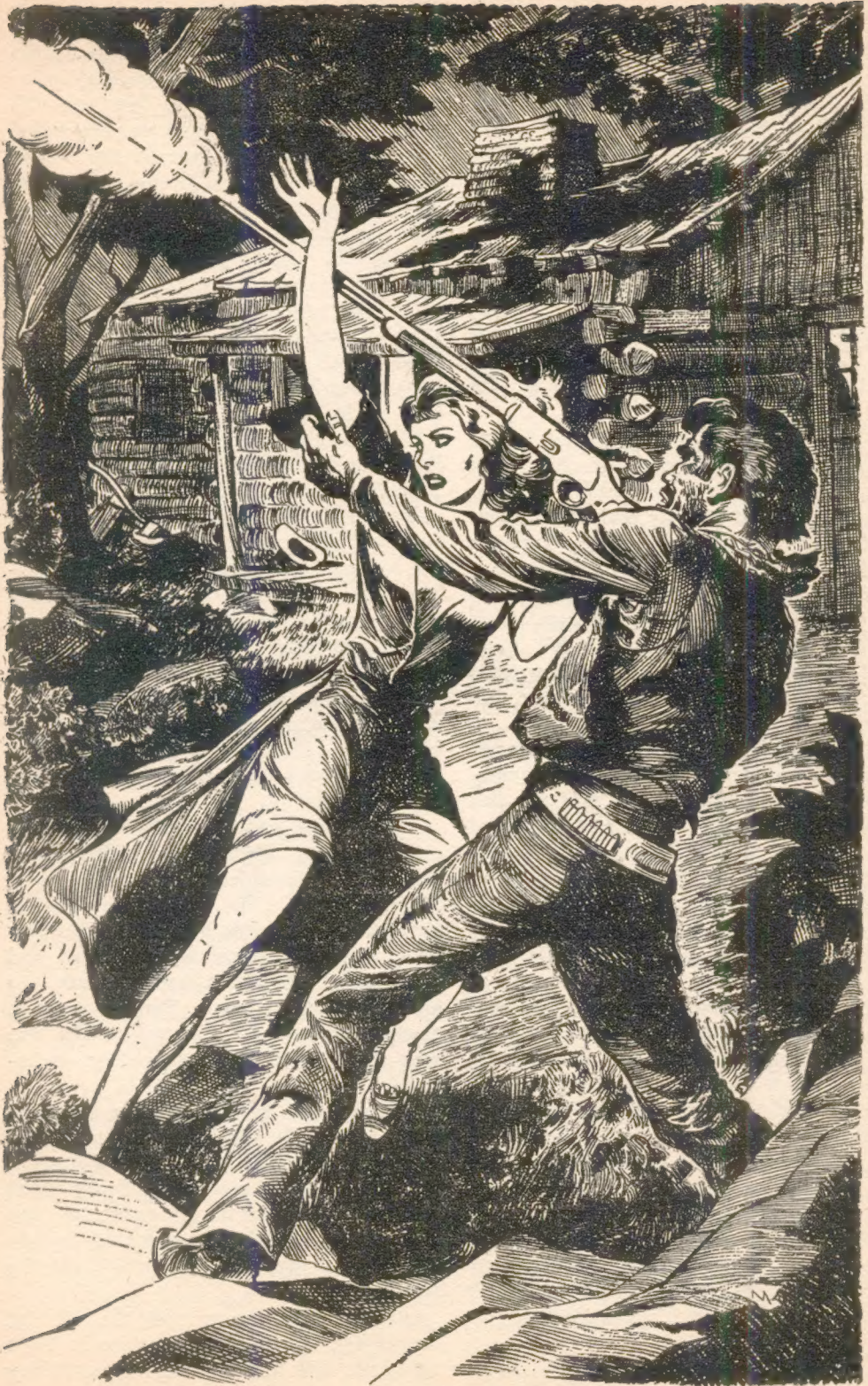
A blood-crazed mob moved into the California hills. Eyes blazing, knives honed, guns lead-heavy, they swore screaming agony and slow death for a weaponless girl who cowered wild-eyed in the brush.

THE SAN FERNANDO VALLEY simmered now, after baking all day under a low heat haze, and its cactus and sage-studded floor crawled with restless lizards, disturbed by the nightmare of intruding sheep that blatted their close-shorn way from grass patch to clump of nodding yellow mustard. The Santa Monica mountains were soft with new grass, white-blossomed chaparral and purple lilac. It was peaceful here.

And there was quiet in the town of Calabasas, for the party of Vincent Garfo, the sheepman, was over. Some said he

was a hard man and some condemned him for the killing of harmless old Tiburcio Urbanos who refused to learn the Yankee land laws. And there were some who laughed that Vincent Garfo would grow broke from hiring so many men who slept all day and grew fat like bandits. But it was natural that some should worry of this, for these days men shied from shadows and the talk was always of the lawless bands who robbed on the Camino Real and cursed with death the many turns in the stage road in the Canyon of Little St. Francis.





*She moved swiftly. He saw the flash of the rifle.*



But all admitted that Vincent Garfo was a man who could give a party. Everything in the saloon had been free and now Garfo and his men were riding back to their camp by the dam on the old Urbanos place in the lower Topanga, and they left behind many stomachs full of California wine and a better understanding. Most men agreed now that it was right Vincent Garfo should run his sheep where he would on the unclaimed land and if Paula Urbanos was not here it was right he should use the rancho. And as Vincent Garfo had said many times, it was better to worry more about the blood spilling of Los Coyotes and less of the land that went to waste.

On the canyon road Vincent Garfo had a smile of accomplishment on his broad face as he rode along, and behind him two supply wagons drawn by mules made musical tracks in the dust of the Topanga road. On the seat of the lead wagon a short fat Mexican sang snatches of a native song and then dozed noisily. This Pancho Garcia could drive in his sleep. Had he not driven this road many years for the good Senor Urbanos and his daughter Paula?

But Senor Urbanos was dead of a bullet now, and the daughter Paula was gone—no one knew where. Some said she had returned to Mexico—some said her mind was bad and she died in the hidden canyons of the Rancho. It was good to drink wine by candle light and speak as if the spirits of the hills had taken Paula Urbanos. There were some who said they had seen the ghost.

But Pancho Garcia was a practical man and a practical man must work. So why not for Vincent Garfo, the great sheep man? Did he not have the most money? The great sheep man was watching now, so Pancho lolled deeper in the seat as if the wine were getting too much for him. But his dark eyes were alert and not the eyes of a drunken man. He was watching a spire of rocks there ahead. Suddenly his voice broke into a ragged rendition of "Adios Mi Chaparitas." And hell struck the supply wagons of Vincent Garfo.

A DOZEN riders broke from the sandstone spires. They struck with the swiftness of coyotes out of the night and

they made yipping sounds not unlike that animal. In a matter of seconds a dozen heads were cracked and Vincent Garfo himself was tied and the saddle horses scattered. And while the dust was still thick in the air the supply wagons pulled away and headed up toward the brushy reaches of Topanga. On the seat of the lead wagon, undisturbed by the interruption, sat Pancho Garcia. And riding close to the off wheel was the thin-waisted leader of the robber band.

"A good night's work, little lizard," said Pancho Garcia, clucking to his mules. "A good night's work indeed. It would have been better had we cut the throat of Vincent Garfo."

"Quit calling me a lizard," the young leader said. Pancho shrugged his heavy shoulders and laughed.

They rode in silence and an impending tension built between Pancho Garcia and the leader of the bandits. It seemed to climax when they came to the Urbanos Rancho, sprawled across the rolling hills, its adobes squatted close to the willow rimmed stream backed behind its earth-fill dam. There was a light in the new shed that Vincent Garfo had built under the big black oak. Pancho Garcia's voice had a whip-like crack to it when he said, "Tonight, Paula?"

"No!" She had taken off her hat now and her blue black hair spilled down around her shoulders and curled away from her face. She looked very young, but there was a white hardness to her features that was somehow unhealthy and unnatural. It drew her mature mouth into a hard straight line. Pancho made a clucking sound with his tongue like one who despairs of making another understand.

"Your heart is still too big for your head, Paula," the old driver chided. "You think you can hide out like the coyote in the rocks, stealing your food like the wood rat, and still have people remember you as you were. I tell you again there is only one way to get Vincent Garfo from the Rancho!"

She tried to ignore what he said by countering, "How did they talk in town tonight? Did they say the stage robbery was the work of Los Coyotes?"

"Is not Valermo one of us?"



Her quick sob was clearly audible and the old driver shifted uneasily on the seat. He pulled the team to a stop and when he spoke his voice had a crooning tenderness in it. He said, "You come ride with me, my little lizard. Pancho will talk to you. Pancho knows sometimes how people feel inside. Once I had to kill a man for the first time, but I was not sorry when it was over."

She dismounted, climbed to the seat beside the old driver, hid her face against his shoulder and sobbed brokenly. He held her close and rocked her gently, cooing, "There, there. Pancho knows." He caught the other riders watching and he yelled, "What is the matter, you pigs? You think we have all night? Perhaps you wish to wait until the sheriff comes to visit, no? *Andale*, before Pancho carves his name on your backbone from the front side with his knife!"

The team lurched again, steeper ground now, and the night breeze whispered across the white blooming chaparral. The girl sat there, her hands clasped tightly between her knees. She said, "I told him we must not touch the stages. I told him this."

He made a scoffing sound of disgust. "Your head is crazy, Paula," he said, slapping his knee with his fist. "Me, Pepe, Alberto—. Those of us who loved your father also love you. *Seguro*, we want more to see you get back the Rancho than anything else. Our heads are twisted like yours because we think first of the name of Urbanos. But these others? Poof! I tell you Valermo is right! Why should we not steal and burn and kill? When we have enough of the gold we go away. Maybe to Sonora. California is no place for people like us any more. We are from a different time!"

"You can go whenever you want," she said softly. "I do not want to hold you against your wishes."

He turned quickly, took her shoulders and shook her roughly. He said, "You are not so big that Pancho cannot spank you. More talk like this and I will put soap in your mouth!"

She squeezed his hand, but she did not smile. It seemed she was trying to force herself to ask the question. She said, "How did it happen?"

"I know only what I am told," Pancho

said softly. "It was Valermo alone—no others. There was much gold on the stage. Four men are dead and there is talk of hangings in San Fernando."

"And they scream for the blood of Los Coyotes."

"But six dozen times Vincent Garfo's men have done worse, I tell you!" The old man's voice was explosive. "Valermo is a good man. Keep the gold. We can use it. If we have the bark should we not have also the bite?"

"No." She said it softly, but there was bitterness in her voice. "At first the people in the hills were our friends and they kept our secrets. Now more and more they lock their doors in our face and one day, for gold, one will tell what he knows of us. Last week in Triunfo Canyon Garnita Flores took away her baby and hid it when I would hold it. I could see by her eyes she thinks there is blood on my hands!"

"I am sorry, Paula," Pancho Garcia said softly. "If this is the way you feel I will speak to Valermo."

He put his arm around her then and he held her close as the wagon jolted over the narrow road. In an hour they came to its end and stopped in a draw screened by elderberry that sloped down from a bare knoll. There was a tiny pasture here and a seeping spring and here a half dozen pack horses, tended by a single one-eyed Mexican waited. The one-eyed man beamed at Paula Urbanos and she said, "My good Alberto."

THE raiders dismounted and fell to work unloading the wagons. Once Pancho turned to a handsome young man who was standing close. "Tie tight the ropes, Valermo," he said, and the thin moon flashed from the old man's teeth. The youth called Valermo walked like a dead man and as he went about his work he glanced from time to time at Paula Urbanos who stood there, clenching and unclenching her hands. When they mounted and rode on, taking the pack animals, Valermo fell in beside the girl.

"But it was for you, Paula," he said softly. "I love you—I have told you so. No man could look at you and not love you. It was to get the money to take you away from this place that makes a fever



in your brain. The day of the Rancho is gone, Paula. Even the Picos have lost their land. Vincent Garfo will not go until the grass ceases to grow or he has a bullet in his heart. Pancho has told you this." He was pleading now. "And these Yankee who drive the stage. They are no different than the ones who trick the Dons with money lending and twisted laws that steal the land. One Yankee is no different than another——"

"Don Abel Stearns?"

"An exception. He came in the old days when men could trust each other." He was for continuing his argument, but he knew he had lost. They rode in silence, with only the ring of a shoe against a stone, the scratch of brush against the sides of the pack saddle or the uneasy creak of a saddle as a man shifted his position.

THERE was dawn in the air and the birds stirred in the lilac when the band dropped down across the last ridge and came to the hidden camp in the Canyon of the Red Rocks. Huge abutments of granite and sandstone hunched out of the brush covered slopes and leaned over the flat floor of the tiny valley where the stream wound through the gnarled sycamores. The entrance was narrow, and on three sides the rock rose straight and sheer. A fog from the Pacific nudged the west slopes and spiraled up in feathery plumes, its dampness unfelt here in the valley. Against a boulder wall a cabin leaned, and in a natural crevice the black of smoke told of many fires. There would be another fire tonight, for Los Coyotes ate well after a raid on Vincent Garfo's supply wagons. Pancho Garcia came to the girl.

"I must ride fast," he said, pressing her hand.

"You can make it look all right?"

The old man grinned. "Have I not done it before? I will crawl from the grass like a frightened rabbit," he promised. "When I untie the sheepman I will talk so fast they will not know what I say——except that I was so afraid I hid!" That seemed to please him, and he smacked his lips over it. His eyes were bright and his voice was half laughter. "And I will say there were fifty men——

all big ones——and they rode toward the Mission of Buenaventura! Ho! Vincent Garfo makes tales about Los Coyotes to cover his own tracks. I wonder if he will tell this one?"

She seemed to know he was trying to cover what must be said. She looked at him and he avoided her eyes. She said, "Valermo?"

The old man became deadly serious and he crooked a finger under her chin, tilted her face and kissed her on the forehead. "We have talked about it, Alberto and me and the others who worked for your father," he said softly. "It is not good Valermo remain with us. It is too dangerous." There was real concern in his voice now. "Remember, little lizard. You must not have the heart of a woman in this business."

She saw Valermo then. He was dressed in his best, and there was a red sash around his middle. She saw him give a knife and other trinkets to one of the men, then he gravely shook hands all around. He started for his horse, not looking at Paula Urbanos. She ran forward quickly and threw her arms around his neck. For a fleeting second she held him, then kissed him on the lips. Pancho Garcia had mounted his horse. He did not look at them.

After that they rode away, up the canyon toward the Calabasas road. Paula Urbanos went to the cabin against the rock. She threw herself across the bed and cried like a small child. Outside the men divided the possessions of Valermo and spoke in low tones.

And the next day the citizens of Calabasas listened intently as old Pancho Garcia, the teamster of Vincent Garfo, the sheepman, told of his narrow escape from the *bandidos*. And they whispered fearfully and debated once more whether Los Coyotes were devils as Vincent Garfo said or saints as some liked to think when they spoke of the horse and its grisly burden.

It had stood, that morning, ground tied in the middle of the street. On its back was a handsome young man and he was bound to the saddle. He was dressed in good clothes and there was a red sash around his middle. It matched the color of the streak that ran from the knife that was between his shoulder blades.



And tied to the saddle strings was a bag of gold, and on it a sign in Spanish. "Here is the man your Yankee law is seeking. We fight only those who steal the land. We have no use for stagecoach gold." And it was signed in the dreaded charcoal scrawl of *Los Coyotes*.

## II

IN THE WELL FURNISHED LAW offices of Anson Brunson on Spring Street in Los Angeles, Harry Travers, junior clerk, fiddled with a sheaf of papers and cursed his fate. Once he went to the window and stared out at the stream of dusty traffic that moved up and down. He spotted a Californio with flat crowned hat riding a single footing palomino, and a wistful grin crossed his deeply tanned but somewhat esthetic young face. This was more like it.

"Oh noble beast with coat of tan,  
Oh muscled steed, thou friend of man—"

Harry Travers twisted his face at the sound of his own poetry and he said "Ugh!" and made a face, much as if he might have swallowed a fly. Damn it all, California was changing!

He sat down, but he did not return to his work. Instead he laced his hands behind his head, leaned back as far as he dared and hummed a snatch of a Mexican tune he had learned last summer in the cool shade of a tiled porch on a huge Rancho. A Rancho that was broken into garden plots now.

Everything was changing. Where the curling surf kissed the mouth of Santa Monica canyon tents stood now and there was a pavilion where one could buy peanuts and the like. And the blue that came only to the Santa Monica hills was being marked by the first shingles of Yankee roof tops. Twilight had come to the days of romance . . . He dropped his chair and to himself he said, "I have no business behind a desk. I am a poet. It is a damn shame I have to eat!"

Philosophy, that, he decided, but spring fever and a good healthy laziness prevented him from going deeper into the matter. Instead he took a knife from his pocket and started idly pegging it into the

top of the polished desk. After awhile he realized what he was doing and stopped sheepishly. Anson Bronson was a meticulous man. He did not like having his furniture marred by either knife blades or spurs. He had said so.

So once again Harry Travers tried to bring his attention back to the case of *Keller vs. Lewis*, but he had little luck. Instead of seeing the legal snarl that now enmeshed the old Rancho Topango Malibu Sequit he saw the land itself, and mostly he saw the passing of an era. It was a thing that worried Harry Travers greatly—this encroaching of formal law on a will such as Don Tapia's original. In that document were such passages as, "And to Anton Carrillo I owe six dollars. If he says it is more it is so." It seemed a sacrilege to add "caveat emptor" and "habeas corpus" to a phrase like that. Someday, in fact, he would write a poem about it. He rejected the idea. Esthetic poems such as Harry Travers planned to write were not built of such sordid stuff as law and empty bellies—

A blue fly buzzed lazily back and forth, beating its body against the window with annoying regularity. Harry Travers picked up a wad of paper and threw it at the fly. He missed. He tried a bigger wad and missed again. The fly left the window and settled on the wall. Harry took a three pound law book from his desk and gave it a heave. The book opened in mid air, changed its course and went through the window with a shattering crash.

Secretly, that did something for the soul of young Harry Travers. It was a symbol of what should happen to the law profession. Civilization as a whole, for that matter, for people had forgotten how to live. But that small corner of his mind that remained practical at times told him he was now sixteen steps closer to being fired, so to make up for it he delved into the papers with vengeance.

He followed it carefully from the time the Topango Malibu Sequit was originally granted to the good Jose Bartolome Tapia in 1804. A grant containing 13,500 acres, and granted without formal surveys. Thirteen thousand acres of hills, brush, live oaks and grass, bordered on one side by the long white sands of the Pacific and on the other by the indefinite line laid out by



a wave of the hand—"from the large rock to near the tree with two trunks—" It was this value line that had made Harry Travers first notice that there was no mention of the Rancho of Tiburcio Urbanos. And Anson Brunson had told him promptly to shut up, for the murder trial of Vincent Garfo was still in the courts . . .

**D**REAMS got the best of him again. Wonder if a small group—four fellows, say—could recapture the old itmes. Start a sort of civilization of their own. A place to dream on the white beach where the surf rolled in from kelp beds. Not likely. The free land was across the hills from the kelp. Kelp . . .

"Where the seal pups yelp  
From their beds of kelp—"

Not bad. Have to remember that. The papers. Damn the papers.

The passing of the old order. It was all here, right in these papers, even to the coming of the Yankee Dons. In 1872 Don Mateo Keller appears on the scene and is now owner of the grant, having succeeded to the title. Yankee to Yankee, now, and the grant was sold to one Carrie S. Lewis, a resident of Cleveland, Ohio. No more paying of debts with the wave of the hand. On February 26, 1874, Mrs. Lewis defaulted in her payments and Anson Brunson brought an action for Don Mateo Keller against Carrie S. Lewis and her husband, G. F. Lewis, to quiet title to the premises—There, by George, he'd done it! Right up to date. And still no mention of Tiburcio Urbanos, he told himself stubbornly.

He was still mad about not being able to get involved in that Urbanos-Garfo case, anyway. But it wasn't likely that he would, seeing as how his sympathy was all for poor Tiburcio Urbanos who had decided to make his own law. Vincent Garfo, the sheepman, was a big man. He had legal leases to graze his sheep on the Topango Malibu Sequit, and, so he and Anson Brunson claimed, the Rancho of Tiburcio Urbanos was a part of the original grant. Probably wasn't, Harry Travers thought, and he had tried to prove it. But no one but Harry Travers seemed to give a damn, anyway. Tiburcio Urbanos was dead,

Vincent Garfo was free of all blame, and the sheep grew fat on the grass. What was one more killing?

It gave Harry Travers an idea. Glancing around to make sure he was alone, he slipped open a drawer of his desk and took out a cap-and-ball Colt. He spun it in his hand—tested its weight—worked the loading lever against the empty chambers. Then he sprang into a quick crouch, twisted his mouth into a vicious snarl and said, "Chu! Chu! Chu!" as he punctured the three corners of the room with imaginary lead. Then he stuffed the gun back in the drawer and plunged his arms into an open file that stood in the corner. Footsteps on the stairs.

A little too late to think of work, now. The door had opened and Anson Brunson stood there, his full beard bristling, a badly battered, dust-caked three-pound law book in his hand. Harry Travers let out a long stream of breath and started thinking fast. Brunson held the book out. His eyes were dark, and right now they looked as if they were holding back a lot of explosive. His gaze wandered from Harry Travers to the scatter of papers on the floor and then to the knife-scarred desk top. The explosives broke through. "Damn it, Travers!" he roared. And he threw the book.

"Now Mr. Brunson," Harry suggested, dodging nicely. "Your blood pressure—"

"Hang the blood pressure, you addle-brained nincompoop! You're sacked, you hear? Sacked! Get the hell out of here and don't let me see your face again!"

Harry Travers felt relieved, now that it was finally over, but he didn't like being told things so definitely. He kept thinking about that part of it while he took his hat from the rack and slipped into his coat. After that he went to the desk, pulled open the drawer and took out the cap-and-ball Colt. Anson Brunson stepped back quickly, as if not quite sure.

But Harry Travers had no intention of killing anyone. He stuffed the gun in his waist band, tilted his hat at a rakish angle, stepped lightly to the door and paused. Then he felt it coming over him. There was no way to fight it off. With a quick motion he reached out, gripped, and gave a sharp tug on Anson Brunson's full beard. Then feeling much relieved he



said, "Thank you for nothing, Mr. Brunson, and with my compliments you and the law profession can go to hell!"

### III

SO IT WAS THAT HARRY Travers, ex-junior clerk, left the law offices of Anson Brunson free as the wind, full of poetry and short of cash. And the three, combined with recent exposure to the land grant of Topango Malibu and the murder trial of Vincent Garfo, gave him his great idea. With every step away from the confining closeness of the law office the idea grew and by the time he reached the Pico House where he owed a bill the idea had flowered into full blossom. Still not practical, perhaps, but it was a way that would let a man become a Yankee Don with little effort and give him time for poetry. After all, what more could any man want than a chance to roll back time?

And in the hills back of Calabasas a man could do just that. Hills that stood with their feet in the long white surf. Hills of a thousand canyons where there was game to be taken for the mere trouble of stalking it and where trout grew fat and lazy in a dozen streams. Broad hillside sweeps perfumed with the fragrance of cured wild oat hat, shaded by the black puddles of tremendous live oak trees. Paradise for a lazy man, and Harry Travers was that.

But a lazy man craves company for his soul, so he spent the next two days rounding up the three compadres of his whom Anson Brunson liked least. That, he felt, was recommendation enough. There was Tony Ferris, that handsome young lady-killer who was hurrying to spend a fortune left to him by his father. Then Willard McCauley, who spoke with a voice of thunder but carefully took flies by the wings and put them out the window rather than kill them. He had turned this business of not working into a new political theory. And Guy Larrimer would want to be in on it, too. Guy Larrimer, who in spite of his scant twenty years was a real figure out of the past. A hunter and trapper who wanted the Missions burned and all the land given back to the Indians. These were fit companions for

a man with time to listen to the dictates of his soul.

So he sought them out and he found them all finally in the bar of the United States Hotel. Willard McCauley and Tony Ferris involved in some violent controversy, while quiet Guy Larrimer with his nimble cards contemptuously stripped the wealth from a man from San Francisco who had looked upon the wine.

They were greatly pleased to hear that Harry Travers had lost his job, and they shook hands gravely. Now they were all of the same cloth. It had been a bit of a thorn having their favorite poet contaminated by sordid wages.

With a bottle of good California wine they went to Harry's room at the Pico House, and when he tried to sell them his plan they all said "no" without listening. So Harry Travers, the poet, re-phrased the idea he had and wove it more into the gossamer thickness of a dream. Then, with the aid of good California wine and the mellowness of time this dream became more and more acceptable until finally his glowing picture of beautiful girls in Calabasas enticed Tony Ferris to put up a hundred dollars for the necessary surveying equipment and the filing fees on the land.

It seemed as good a way as any to test his political theories, yawned Willard McCauley, so he would go along to this magic land of Calabasas where a man could sleep on his back and a thicket of fruit would grow up around him and drop its succulent morsels into his open mouth without disturbing his snores.

Guy Larrimer needed the least coaxing, for he had hunted every inch of that country, chasing the illusive white flag of a deer's tail through the mat of mountain lilac. He knew of the trout that sunned themselves in the ripples of the creeks, and he knew of the perch and the golden corbina and the yellow fin that fed a hundred feet off shore in the cream like surf of the mild Pacific.

And that night these three helped Harry Travers out the back window of the Pico House leaving an unpaid bill and some empty bottles. They had a fuzzy remembrance of the Big Four Land and Water Company having been formed. A land and water company that had no dream of



conquest, no fight for future, and no plans to expand. It was built on careless dreaming, dedicated to the California that was dying, and it required only a section of land in the proper location to give it substance.

And when the night passed its noon and the moon, fat as a melon, waddled out of the hills, Harry Travers, riding across the Cahuenga mustard fields in all his costumed glory, knew how to get that land. He had a hundred dollars in his pocket and some good books of poetry in his saddle bag. There was a loaded Walker Colt swinging in a hand-tooled holster at his side. A flat-crowned hat sat solidly on his head and a pair of belled spurs made music at his heels. In the bright red morning he rode into Calabasas and he was greeted by a dead man in the streets and much guarded whispering about a wild bunch known only as Los Coyotes.

**D**URING the next two weeks as Harry Travers diligently searched the many canyons for the particular segment of the government land that was to become the utopia of the Big Four Land and Water Company, he heard more of Los Coyotes. And in time he no longer scoffed. For stages were robbed and wayfarers were killed, and it seemed that the very ground of Calabasas was steeped in human blood.

Sensitive, overly impressionistic, the mood of the land began to change with Harry Travers, and he shied away from the shaded canyons with their hint of swift death and looked more toward the open slopes where the sun poured strength into the already dry grass.

Thousands of acres of free land. From the edge of the Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit, now in litigation, to the reaches of El Escorpion, across the narrow valley. Land for the asking, and yet there were few takers. And the few who did live in the brush-hidden cabins raising their gobbling bands of half-wild turkeys as often as not faded into the seclusion of the towering rock piles and the fastness of the thickets rather than share a dipper of water and answer the many questions of the Yankee who dressed like a don and packed the surveyor's transit on his shoulder.

So it was that half through the second

week Harry Travers found himself scouting closer and closer to the little town of Calabasas. And it was then he came upon the lower Topanga and the Ranchito of Tiburcio Urbanos, now the main sheep camp of Vincent Garfo, who held a grazing lease on the parent Rancho.

And whether it was the possible companionship or the friendly beauty of the place, Harry Travers did not know. But it was here that his maps, his transit and level, and his memory of the original surveys made for Anson Brunson picked the section of land that he sought. It was good that he had found it, for within three days Tony Ferris, Willard McCauley and Guy Larrimer would be here to join him.

He was satisfied with the high knoll where a house would overlook the valley. There was strength in the towering sandstone cliffs that stood like sentinels across the back line of the section, putting on and taking off colors like gaudy garments. There was poetry in the perfumed slope where the plumed fragrance of the mountain lilac and the puffy white essence of the chaparral laid softly in two directions. It was a friendly place, more democratic than the gloom deep canyons, less commensal than the chattering marts of the flat valley. His partners would approve, he knew.

So he returned to Calabasas to make housing arrangements for himself and his partners. And this time it seemed that the old Mexican who drove the supply wagon for Vincent Garfo watched him even more closely. It was a thing that had gone on ever since Harry Travers had begun his surveys.

At first he had thought the harmless looking old Mexican was intrigued by the instruments; but later it had grown to the point where the man's eyes had a way of burning into Harry's back. He turned up sometimes at the shanties of the turkey raisers; again unexpectedly in an open spot on some high imminence. Pancho Garcia, they said his name was, at one time employed by Tiburcio Urbanos, the man shot down by Vincent Garfo.

Harry Travers tried to brush it off as coincidence. He was satisfied with all the legal aspects of his claims, now, so he went to the saloon to have a deserved drink. There he came face to face with



Vincent Garfo for the first time since he had seen him as a defendant in Anson Brunson's office. Vincent Garfo, acquitted of the stupid murder charge, had grown big enough that he did not need polite preliminaries when speaking to a junior clerk, nor did he respond to Harry's warm greeting.

He was a short, broad and heavy man. He had a flat face and a crooked nose that at one time was straight. When he spoke he had a way of holding his head to one side as if to favor a bad ear. He smoked a cigar and used it to punctuate his sentences. He downed his drink and looked steadily at Harry Travers with the unblinking eyes of a fish. He said, "I hear you and three others are figuring on taking up a section of land."

It was not an attempt at friendly conversation. It was a challenge. For those few seconds no one else at the bar moved or spoke and Harry Travers saw the old Mexican driver, Pancho Garcia, standing there close with his head cocked to catch every word.

A bit of rebellion, never far removed, flowed through Harry Travers. It left a vacantness in his stomach and set up a burning at the lobes of his ears. He said, "You heard right. Did you have something to say about it?"

"Yes I have," said Vincent Garfo the sheep man. "Don't do it!"

He turned and left the saloon and he was followed closely by Pancho Garcia, the driver of his supply wagon.

#### IV

**H**ARRY TRAVERS WAS A POET, and as such he would go to great lengths to avoid unpleasantness. But what difference is there between the emotion that drives a man to poetry and the emotion that drives a man to rebellion? There was something about a direct order that rankled the soul of Harry Travers. It had been that way when Anson Brunson had sacked him and told him to get out. No force in the world could have stopped Harry Travers from pulling Anson Brunson's beard that day. Standing here now, the poet knew that sooner or later he would have to pull the beard of Vincent Garfo, the sheep man.

It fumed and burned within Harry Travers until it became an obsession. So that two days later when Tony Ferris, Willard McCauley and Guy Larrimer came to Calabasas they found, instead of their soft-eyed poet lounging with others in the shade of the giant oak in the middle of the street, a grim-faced young man trying devilishly hard to build up a righteous rage within himself.

Entangled with the glowing account of the section of land that Harry had chosen for them were such phrases as "Damn miscarriage of justice in the first place. He probably shot Tiburcio Urbanos in cold blood."

"An odd phrase that, 'cold blood,'" said Guy Larrimer, disinterested.

"Another case of the maggots of money disemboweling the poor," Willard McCauley said, rolling his wine glass.

"If you'll excuse me, gentlemen," said Tony Ferris, "Up the street in a certain cantina is a girl who sings like a bird."

"Who the hell does he think he is?" demanded Harry Travers. "Telling us we can't file on public land!"

The three voices were nearly in unison. "Somebody says we *can't* do something?"

"That's what I've been trying to say," said Harry Travers.

They objected and growled, but they listened more closely now to his story of Vincent Garfo, the sheepman, whose word had grown to be law around Calabasas. And if there had been any doubt about the acceptability of the section of land Harry Travers had picked that doubt was now dispelled. The four board members, all vice presidents, of the Big Four Land and Water Company, were definitely agreed that they should be neighbors of Vincent Garfo.

They even went so far as to make a noisy show of neighborly friendliness from the backs of their rented horses as they went out to appraise their land. Vincent Garfo himself was not there to greet them, and his hirelings, caught, apparently, without orders, could offer nothing better than non-committal grunts and hostile stares.

Once they had reached the knoll where they planned on making their camp and perhaps later building their house, they separated and went their several ways,



promising to meet here again at dusk to compare notes. Harry Travers carried his Walker Colt in its hand-tooled holster. The weight of it had begun to feel natural now. Secretly, he had been practicing a quick draw in front of a mirror. Guy Larrimer, never without a rifle, vowed that he would bring home a fat young buck to break the monotony of mouldy mutton and stringy beef put out by the restaurants.

Tony Ferris was wistfully concerned about the distance to the night life in Calabasas, from here an unimposing cluster of adobe huts in the fertile shade of the valley of a thousand oaks. Willard McCauley, they all suspected, would find a sunny slope nearby and sleep away the afternoon. But Harry Travers himself, still concerned some with legal descriptions and boundaries, rode off toward the towering cliffs and then angled off across a grass high meadow where he found the old original blazed tree that marked the corner of the Rancho Topango Malibu Sequit.

He lounged in his saddle, looped the reins around the horn, and let the loggy livery stable horse pick its own way, wherever it would. The horse, drawn by the scent of water, ambled loose-lipped to the little creek that bubbled from the huge natural springs on the old much-disputed Ranchito of Tiburcio Urbanos. From the springs the water trickled away in a creek that was now narrow and swift, now broad and coolly deep. It was a creek that wandered through a twisting canyon with gentle walls and in time the water lost itself finally back in the ground from which it came.

He was beyond the borders of the proposed claim of the Big Four Land and Water Company, he knew, but it made little difference. He removed the horse's bridle, slipped the short rope that was tied on the saddle around the beast's neck, and secured it to the limb of an overhanging willow.

Then on foot he worked his way along the edging of narrow sand beside the creek, pausing here and there to lie on the rocks, basking his back with their warmth, absorbing with his face and chest the sunlight that filtered down through the gently swaying alders. Here he saw the silver

on the crest of the tiny ripples or watched the sycamore leaves, stems curved like the prows of Viennese gondolas, skipping across the placid pools.

Further on he came to a ten-foot waterfall that plunged over the granite and in years of ceaseless work had scooped out a deep basin. From this, the water, thrown into a slow whirling dance, had gradually pushed back the soft shale, ground it to sand, and formed a miniature white beach. Harry Travers the poet, caught by the beauty of the place, removed his boots and socks, rolled up his tight fitting trousers, sat down on a rock and dangled his feet into the cool water. It was the short, sobbing gasp of terror that caught his attention.

HE raised his eyes slowly, and there, almost directly across the pool from him, he saw her. He knew that she was quite naked, but she had pulled the soft willows around her to add to the protection of the water, and now all he could see was the whiteness of her shoulders, the flowing mass of black hair as it floated out on the water, and those liquid eyes.

She was like a wild thing out of these mountains. A deer, trapped in a box canyon. A rabbit, caught in a snare. A city girl in a similar predicament might have sent hot darts of devilish abandon scorching through Harry Travers, but somehow there was none of that in him now. Instead he watched her with the eyes of a perfectionist; watched her in the way an artist watches a model.

He saw her as symbolic of this wild and beautiful land that somehow was pitifully fighting back against the encroachments of civilization. Brush grew into the clearings; boulders snapped the shares of plows; and bands, like Los Coyotes, prowled the high roads. All these things he saw in the terrified face that seemed to float there on the surface of the shivering water.

Without saying a word he turned his back, put on his boots and walked back down the stream, the way he had come. Once he thought he heard a rustling of the bushes, the splash of water from her glistening white body. But he did not turn to see. Somehow he knew he would never forget that face and somehow he



knew that this was a secret he would not share with his compadres.

He rode slowly and it was near sundown when he found the knoll again. He saw that the others were there ahead of him and a feeling of keen anticipation ran out from them and reached him. It was the sort of feeling that puts a man on guard and Harry began thinking of defenses he would offer if they did not like his selection. "*There was no free land closer to town—*" That for Tony Ferris. "*As little to do here as any place we could find, less than most—*" That for Willard McCauley. To Guy Larrimer he'd say, "*You've got the whole hills—*" He galloped the horse the last few hundred yards. He was sure when he saw their practiced smirks.

"Did you look any place else except here on top of this knoll?" drawled Willard McCauley.

"Which end of that surveying thing you been looking through?" Tony Ferris wanted to know.

"Now leave him alone," mocked Guy Larrimer. "He just hasn't told you yet, that's all. There's a beer spring right here where we're standing. Just needs to be uncovered."

"As members of the Big Four Land and Water Company I think we should know such things," said Willard McCauley.

"Just Land Company," corrected Guy Larrimer. "Just Land Company."

"Damn it to hell!" pleaded the poet.

And Tony Ferris took pity on him. He said, "It's a wonderful spot, Harry, and I don't mind your spending my hundred dollars to find it. But would you mind telling us where in hell you plan to get water on this little paradise?" Harry Travers felt suddenly thirsty. It was little things like this that had upset Anson Brunson so. He hadn't given the matter of water a thought.

By the time he got back to Calabasas that night he was laced raw by the practiced tongues of his compadres, and even the subconscious knowledge that any one of them would die for him didn't ease the pain. There was only one thing that helped. That was when he thought of the hills and the canyons and saw the beautiful frightened face that seemed to float on the surface of the water of a placid moun-

tain stream. But in time that too took on a sour note, for he kept remembering that the stream was claimed by Vincent Garfo.

## V

THEY LET UP ON HIM AFTER awhile, but the chagrin of Harry Travers was a bright coal that was not quenched by the beverage he drank in the little cantina where the painted gourds and the strings of chili peppers framed the beamed door. He listened to his companions go to great lengths to explain the many uses of water, treating it as a subject of recent discovery about which all men were not yet versed. They even went so far, late into their drinks, as to include Pancho Garcia, the driver for Vincent Garfo, in their circle of elucidation. And Harry Travers drank and smarted.

But in time Harry Travers, the poet, felt that unmistakable delicious lassitude that always preceded an idea. Whether it was some word dropped by amiable Pancho Garcia who talked much and said nothing or some bit of logic accidentally left in the nonsense of his friends, Harry didn't know. But the idea grew until he forgot the smarting taunts brought on by his impractical short sightedness. In time he could contain himself no longer and he exploded his question.

For a long time old Pancho Garcia sat there, and his muddy eyes seemed to glow in the semi-darkness as they met Harry's and held. It was as if he were trying to see through this young one who tramped the hills with his surveyor's tools. At last the old man said, "That is true. I was with the household of Tiburcio Urbanos for fifty years."

Harry felt a chill of excitement prick the skin of his back. His scalp seemed to tighten and each hair became an individual point. He said, "Tell me one thing, if you know. Was the Ranchito Urbanos really a part of the original Topango Malibu Sequit grant as Vincent Garfo said in his trial? Did Tapia give the land to Urbanos?"

Again there was that long puzzling silence, then the soft voice of Pancho Garcia. "No, Senor. That is Vincent Garfo's lie. It was a separate rancho. In the old days I have seen the map."



Harry Travers gave a wild whoop that elicited the comment from Guy Larrimer that the boy must have struck water. "Water, hell!" said Harry Travers, "Gold!"

"Can't tell you everything," he said excitedly as they pressed him. "Got to check up first." He paused, making sure that no outsider but Pancho Garcia was listening. "Look," he said, spreading the fingers of his left hand, pushing them aside as counters with the forefinger of his right. "Old Urbanos is dead. Shot down by Vincent Garfo." They did not notice that Pancho Garcia had taken a knife from his belt. "Two, the girl has disappeared, no one knows where and no one gives a damn!" The old man was feeling the edge of the knife with the ball of his thumb. "Three, that makes the Rancho Urbanos abandoned land and I know for sure that Garfo hasn't filed on it! I followed the case closely when Anson Brunson had it. I knew it was never proved Garfo had a lease on the land——"

The sharp whistle of excitement had a sobering effect on the other members of the Big Four. Here, now, was a ready-made paradise if what Harry Travers said was true. They had all but forgotten Pancho Garcia when the old man said, "But the Senorita Urbanos. Is this not her land?"

"If she were here to claim it, sure," said Harry, brushing it aside. "If she had pressed her case the law would have given her the land——just as it would have given it to her father. But he tried to push Garfo off and Garfo was smart enough to force Urbanos to lose his head. Result? Poof! Self defense!"

Pancho Garcia seemed to talk to himself now, and he toyed with the point of the knife absently. "But Tiburcio Urbanos did not believe in the law," he said softly. "He had seen too many times where the court took from a man his land——"

Harry Travers leaned forward suddenly and put his hand on the old man's arm. "Listen, Pancho," he said softly, "Be quiet about this until I can get the papers I want and you won't have to work for the man who killed your best friend!"

The old man seemed dazed. He sat there, unblinking, his bare feet planted

firmly on the cool dirt floor, the sharp spike of the tequilla and the sourness of the beer laying around him, part of the semi-darkness. After a while he finished his beer and the foam remained in a frothy crescent above his thick lips. He drew the inside of his arm across his face and said, "I will say nothing to Vincent Garfo about this."

Harry Travers said, "Good! We won't forget you."

"No, you won't forget me," Pancho Garcia agreed.

WHEN he was gone Tony Ferris, more suspicious than the others, said, "If you're on the right track, Harry, do you think it was smart letting that old boy in on it?"

"Why not?" shrugged Harry Travers. "You boys don't see the insides of that man the way I do. Hell, there's hatred for Garfo sticking out all over him!"

"He gives me the creeps," said Willard McCauley, shaking his shoulders.

But creeps or no creeps, they found Pancho useful and willing. It was Garcia who produced an old *diseno* that showed the north boundaries of the Rancho Malibu distinctly excluding the little ranchito of Tuburcio Urbanos. It was Pancho Garcia who planted the first seeds of revolt that would lead to open seizure of the property. But it was Harry Travers who made the legal moves to claim the ranchito in the name of the Big Four Land and Water Company.

It took some padding of the truth and a lot of swallowing of pride to get what he wanted from Anson Brunson, but once inside the lawyer's files Harry's knowledge of sure victory made it worth while. And without telling his purpose he got Brunson to agree that there was no legal doubt the Ranchito of Urbanos was abandoned land, subject to homestead. Then armed with the exact wording of the lease that let Garfo sheep graze on the Rancho Topango Malibu Sequit, Harry Travers went back to Calabasas, legal claimant with his three compadres, of the Ranchito of Tiburcio Urbanos, subject only to contest of one Paula Urbanos who had not been seen since the death of her father. Pancho Garcia took the news silently and thoughtfully, and during the celebration of the



new owners there at the cantina he disappeared. And that afternoon, fired by wine and success, the Big Four rode to their new Rancho to personally serve notice on Vincent Garfo, the great sheep man.

It was a rancho little different than a dozen others, except that it was small. There back of Calabasas, Topanga, chewed out of the upheaval of peaks and tooth-marked by the hungry gods, twisted deeper and deeper through blood-red sandstone cliffs or curved gracefully and coyly away from blossomed slopes. Here in the lower reaches was the rolling land and here was the life-giving stream fed by the springs at the base of the cliff, a stream that was below the ground as much as it was above, invaluable in this land of scant rain.

On a knoll was the cool-porched adobe, and here the stream was placid and broad in its slight valley, backed up against its earth filled dam. And from its lip *zanjas* reached out black-tipped, like fingers with uncleaned nails, to give water to the thirsty plots that had been gardens in a happy past.

NOW there was nothing but the trampled black-pelleted barrenness of the sheep camp, the sprawling unloveliness of the poled shearing corrals, and the listlessness of unhitched wagons and empty pack saddles under the brush roof of an open shed. Down near the stream were a half dozen tents where the shearers and herders slept, and it was this that made the natives of Calabasas say many times that Vincent Garfo hired more men than he needed.

There was a long plank table, supported by saw horses, under one of the spreading live oak trees. And on either side were benches similarly constructed. Here a dozen tattered men, reeking of sheep, sat thumbing grease-thick cards, playing for stakes seldom found in a sheep camp.

The cards remained exactly as they were at the second the players had turned to see the four intruders. There was not a movement of a hand nor of an eyelash, and there was no sound except that one man swallowed noisily. Harry Travers said, "We came to talk to Vincent Garfo. They said in town we'd find him here."

A bearded man, larger than the others, a man with glittering blue eyes, thought for a long time, then said, "I'll take you to see him." He put down his cards carefully, as if they were breakable. Then he wiped his big hands on his bibbed overalls. After that he indicated the main house with this thumb but he did not lead the way. He stayed slightly behind, and his feet made no sound on the hard packed adobe trail.

And Vincent Garfo greeted them as if it were no more than a neighborly call, his ever present cigar making quotation marks around his welcome. But the welcome came from his loose flat lips and not from his eyes and the two Mexicans who appeared with a *jolla* of wine moved with the stiffness of men whose bellies recoil from the flat touch of cold steel inside a waistband.

Willard McCauley, usually harmless in his blustering wild-eyed bellowing, was suddenly quiet. Guy Larrimer, as inscrutable as a Fennimore Cooper Indian, drew even more within himself. Voluble Tony Ferris drank his wine too hurriedly and Harry Travers forgot the glib words he had planned. But the law was with them. Harry Travers said, "There's been a change of ownership in this land and we wanted to talk to you in regards as to how it would affect your enterprises——"

The left middle of Garfo's upper lip curled slightly, exposing the tip of a pointed eye tooth. He said, "Before the Topango Malibu went into litigation I made sure that a change of ownership wouldn't affect me."

Harry Travers looked for help in the eyes of his companions, found their support, cleared his throat and said, "But you must know by now, Garfo, that this land is not part of the Malibu grant. We four here," indicating his companions, "are the newcomers."

There was no betraying emotion on the face of Vincent Garfo. He toyed with the ash of his cigar—a bit more deliberately, perhaps, and said, "Oh?"

It put Harry Travers at a disadvantage and he fumbled with words, trying to make it positive, yet avoiding an open threat. And at last Vincent Garfo, tired of this juvenile diplomacy, stood up suddenly and said, "Gentlemen, if you have



filed on this land and it is all legal, success to you. I hope you enjoy it—after I'm through with it!"

He left no doubt as to his meaning and the finality of it struck the rebellious spark in Harry Travers that seemed always to be fired by flat demands. He said, "I'm glad to see you take that attitude, Garfo. We feel that ten days should be sufficient time for you to move your sheep and your headquarters elsewhere."

Vincent Garfo was smiling now. A full, tantalizing smile. He looked at the four young men and seemed to find amusement. He said, "Suppose I tell you to go to hell, gentlemen?"

"It will become a matter of opinion as to who makes the trip!" said Harry Travers.

They left then, unmolested and apparently unnoticed by the men who still played cards. They said nothing, but Harry Travers kept hoping that he was not the only one who had the dribble of fear on the crease of his back. The night met them, and the fog came through the canyon. It was a night that was balmy, yet somehow a night in which a man might shiver.

It was in the cantina, over tequila, that they admitted to themselves frankly that they had declared war, and it seemed that each one shuddered more than usual over the sting of the liquor. They joked, they laughed. And it was all hollow. This had happened before, here in Calabasas, this trying to move Vincent Garfo from land he chose to hold. It was said it was as hopeless as trying to capture Los Coyotes.

Instead of seeing Pancho Garcia himself they saw the change in him. He was like a man who has thrown off fetters with one blanket decision. He wore riding boots, knee-length, and he moved with a certain quickness they had not noticed before. He smiled as broadly as usual but there was no mirth there. He singled out Harry Travers, refused a drink, and whispered rapidly in the ex-law clerk's ear. Bewildered, Harry Travers followed him outside. He said, "Why all the secrets, Pancho? If you've found another map as you say we should all know about it. Besides, it makes little difference——."

In the dim glow that came from the door of the cantina Pancho Garcia's eyes

seemed to be all whites. He said, "It was not a map, Senor Travers. It is about the girl, Paula Urbanos, I wish to speak!"

Harry dropped the cigarette he had started to roll. That was different. Was some female going to come out of the past at this moment to spoil everything? "What about her, Pancho?" he snapped.

The old Mexican motioned Harry closer, in that confidential way he had. And as Harry leaned down to hear the half whisper, Pancho Garcia's hand moved up, down, then slowly aside. The whites of his eyes grew even wider as he tucked the gun he held back in his sash and caught at the body of Harry Travers to keep it from falling into the dust. There was almost a sob in Pancho Garcia's voice when he said, "That is what about Paula Urbanos, Senor Travers! I do not understand these things but if you would steal the land that belongs to my little lizard you are no better than Vincent Garfo himself!" He made a hissing sound and two dark shapes appeared from nowhere. They lead a saddled horse.

## VI

THE SWAYING OF THE HORSE and the throbbing of the cut on his scalp combined to make Harry Travers sick when he opened his eyes. He found that his hands were tied and his feet were drawn tight under the horse's belly. Additional ropes secured him in the saddle. Ahead of him, leading the horse, Pancho Garcia rode a ragged pinto. He was singing "Adios Mi Chaparitas" in a cracked voice.

They rode through a draw, thick with chaparral, mountain lilac and an occasional elderberry, and the air was fragrant with the summer bloom. By the laboring of the horses he knew they were climbing fast, and by the faint patch of sky that seemed to grow constantly brighter he knew they were near the top of a ridge. Then he closed his eyes against the nausea that swept him. At the moment the outcome of his plight did not bother him. He wanted only to lie down—have a drink of water. The horses stopped and a voice hailed them from a pile of sandstone boulders. Pancho Garcia made a satisfactory answer, and the horses started on, turning



constantly on the many switch-backs.

When Harry Travers dared open his eyes again they were riding up the sandy floor of a narrow canyon, and a stream babbled aimlessly over smooth rocks. It was cooler here in the shade of giant sycamores and the rocks were rich with green moss and outcropping of goldback and maidenhair fern. Harry spoke for the first time. "A drink of water. I'm sick."

"Ah, you crazy one," Pancho Garcia said. "You are sick, eh? If it was not for the little lizard you would be dead, my friend. She tried to keep the blood smirch from the name of Los Coyotes. Poor innocent little lizard. A drink, eh? If I had my way the ants would eat you when they had finished with Vincent Garfo!"

The little lizard . . . Paula Urbanos . . . Los Coyotes . . . The words piled up in Harry Travers' brain. They connected, but they only set up a throbbing and made little sense. His tongue felt as if it would burst in his mouth and there was a burning fever in his cheeks. The tinkle of the stream was a tantalizing thing that wore on him like the drip of water on a drum. The sudden murmur of voices broke on him and jerked him partially to his senses and he opened his eyes to see the cabin against the rock and the smoke-stained natural fireplace. There was a girl. A girl with black hair and wide eyes and a face that was frightened and beautiful. A face that seemed to float on the surface of a placid stream. She gave the orders to cut his bonds.

He slid from the saddle, helpless as a child, and when he tried to stand his feet went out from under him and he fell heavily. Vaguely, he saw the girl's face, close to his. A beautiful face. The same face that had haunted his dreams since that day there at the natural pool near the foot of the cliffs. He tried desperately to know whether this was a continuance of his dream or a reality. He heard her call for water.

**W**HEN HE opened his eyes it was grey morning, and he did not know how many days had passed. The fog, in from the ocean for the night, had settled in the little valley. The damp fragrance of it was wine to his senses and the jeweled fringe of it across his grey blanket was



like the winking eyes of a friend. He sat up stiffly and felt a rifle barrel press gently against his chest. A deformed little man with one eye spoke to him in Spanish, and though he did not understand each word the rifle made it clear.

After that he lay there, trying to puzzle things out, until at last Pancho Garcia came to him, late in the afternoon, and ordered him up. "You are to eat, pig," Pancho Garcia said, his mouth drawn in a distasteful grimace. "Perhaps to fatten before butchering. I hope."

A pitcher of chocolate. A haunch of roast venison. A sputtering trout browning on a green willow stick. Good wine that might come from a Vincent Garfo supply wagon. Harry Travers eyed them thoughtfully, then saw the girl come from the cabin by the rock and he felt a twinge of



pain somewhere inside his chest as he put the two together and considered the naiveness of his captor. Was this, then, the leader of the dreaded Coyotes?

She tried to make herself seem such when she spoke to him. She tilted her chin up and kept her eyes level. Her pronunciation of English was perfect, yet her phrasing held a hint of musical Spanish. He found himself wondering more about which church school she had attended than about the fate she had planned for him. She said, "They tell me you have information about the Rancho Urbanos and can show me legal ways in which I can get what is rightfully mine."

Harry Travers got up. He could feel the faint smile playing across his lips when he said, "Won't you sit down?"

She said, "Do not forget you are a prisoner!"

"How can I forget?" he asked in mock concern. "Every man knows of the blood-letting and thieving of the terrible Los Coyotes!"

"That's a lie!" she said, too quickly. "My fight has been with Vincent Garfo who killed my father!"

"You are beautiful when you are angry," he said softly. "So pitifully beautiful."

And suddenly, there in the Canyon of the Red Rocks, Harry Travers was again the poet. He saw the tragedy of this girl's life and the tragedy of Pancho Garcia—that strange brigand who would cut out the heart of a man with as little concern as he would show for a fly. A man who thirsted for blood, and yet was like a kitten of Paula Urbanos. And this girl, vitally alive with all the natural longings of a nineteen year old, shut off here away from the world a fugitive from justice. But worse than that, a fugitive from reality. was his epic poem! These children of the past. He said softly, "Paula, let me talk to you."

He was not surprised when he saw tears in her eyes. She was confused, making excuses. She said, "I want only that which is rightfully mine."

He said, "Has running away helped you get it?"

He had hoped for an answer, for he could have talked to her then, he knew, and he might have convinced her that

holding him would accomplish nothing. But at that moment a look-out came at a dead gallop into the Canyon of the Red Rocks. Excitement colored his face and foam flecked his horse. There was a quick gathering of the men, and in front of them Paula Urbanos became again the leader of Los Coyotes.

She listened, tight-lipped, and from snatches of conversation that he could understand Harry Travers learned that hell was loose again in the Canyon of Little St. Francis. The stage station was a smouldering heap, four men were dead and there were two who were not expected to live and one was a woman. The horses had been needlessly slaughtered, and twenty thousand dollars in gold was gone. And now in the valley and from as far away as Los Angeles men were gathering and a lynch-hungry posse was forming to put an end to the deviltry of Los Coyotes.

Harry Travers could not control the heavy pounding of his heart as he saw this girl, a moment before so helpless, a confident leader now, reassuring her men, climaxing with a haughty command that the prisoner be guarded well. She went back in the cabin and Harry Travers the poet had a strange knowledge that she had done so just in time to avoid showing the tears that he had known were so close to the surface.

**B**UT that night after the fire in the clearing had died to a bed of coals Paula came to see him. At first she made it seem like an accident. She paused, surprised, and to the guard she said, "I did not know this was the place you kept the prisoner."

The gnome-like guard smiled, his teeth flashing. "A handsome prisoner, no, Senorita?"

For a second Harry thought she would slap the man, then she said, "Leave us alone, Alberto, and keep your lips sealed. There are things I must know."

The guard said, "Sometime there are things you should ask your heart, Senorita. You forget I have known you since the time you were a little girl."

"*Vaya!*" she commanded sharply. "There is no room for such nonsense!"

"I will be close by where I cannot see



but I can hear if you call," the guard said, still teasing.

They were alone then and an awkward silence came between them. It was a moonlight night such as comes only to the Santa Monica hills. The mountains stood in veiled blue mistiness, looming twice their size, and the leafy shadows of the sycamores made no movement on the red earth. The faint breath of the day's heat lingered yet in the Canyon of the Red Rocks. It was Harry Travers who spoke first. "I hoped you would come," he said simply.

"I came only to discuss the laws that concern the Rancho," she said tartly. "Soon now I am going back to claim what is mine."

He shook his head. "Why don't you tell me the truth, Paula? You've come here because you are trapped and you know it. It's in your eyes. You were young and there was no one to tell you, so you dreamed of men riding at your beck and call. Handsome young *caballeros* who would drive Vincent Garfo from the valley and people would proclaim you a heroine." He clicked his tongue against his teeth and moved a step closer to her. "The Sister who taught you your lessons was a great admirer of Joan of Arc, no, Paula?"

She was suddenly angry. "You have no right to talk to me like this!"

"I have, Paula, because I too am a dreamer."

THE MASK of reserve fell from her as easily then as if she had been a little girl. Standing there with her head half turned he could see the change. The moonlight softened her features and left a glint of light in her blue black hair. He tried to picture her in a low-necked gown with high combs in her hair dancing at the *baile* in San Fernando. She turned to him suddenly and her eyes were blurred. "What must I do?" she said helplessly.

"Give it up," he said quickly. "Go back to Calabasas. Say you were visiting with your people in Mexico."

Her lips set in a hard line. "You said you knew what they said of Los Coyotes. Murder—robberies—if I were to go back now your law would hang me!" There was a cutting bitterness in her voice and

Harry Travers was suddenly annoyed at her childish insistence and at the same time he felt she should be in his arms with her head on his shoulder. He tried to reason, gently.

"Do they need to know you are the leader of Los Coyotes?"

He thought he saw the tears spill and then he caught the silver on her cheek. She said, "Someday, somehow, they'll have to know the leader. Do you think I would let someone else take the blame?"

There was a heaviness in his chest and an emptiness in his arms. He said, "This isn't what you came here to talk about." He nearly whispered it.

"I don't know why I came here." She said it as if she were frightened.

"You came here because it was important to you that I see you as you are."

She spoke rapidly. "You are conceited. Why should I care what you think?"

"But you do."

He had taken two steps toward her, and there in the soft night he could see the loveliness of her and the yielding smoothness of her creamy skin, the luscious deep red of her generous mouth. It was as natural as if they had known each other for years and planned this moment. He took her into his arms tenderly and kissed her and from the burning pain that ran through him he knew that she had never kissed a man this way before. He was exquisitely happy and yet he felt as if he were on the verge of tears. The Canyon of the Red Rocks turned slowly in the moonlight. Then he let her go and she walked away from him, back toward her cabin. He could hear the soft sobs in her throat. The heaviness in his chest seemed to drag down and press against his legs. Alberto, the guard, came out of the darkness, whistling a small tune.

After the silence of sleep came to the camp Harry Travers could not rest. His mind kept twisting like the strange winds that sometimes lift the dust from the floor of the canyon. There was a steady aching in the back of his legs and when he tried to figure out what had happened to him he came to the realization that in those few seconds he had fallen in love. And in time, when he could reason, he saw that the guard was being lax in his duty.

Harry felt a quick thrill that was pinned



suddenly by a spike of fear. Was this a trap? Had she come here tonight knowing and planning what he would do? Knowing that in the mental turmoil that was sure to follow that kiss he would be given a chance to escape? She had a strange code, this leader of Los Coyotes, and too much time alone had twisted her thinking. She would not let a man be killed by her orders, but a bullet in the back of an escaping prisoner. Was that a different thing? He'd have to risk it. He studied the guard closely, tossed a rock near the sleeping man's feet. The guard shifted lazily but did not open his eyes.

The kiss was still fresh on his lips. She couldn't do a thing like this. So he started crawling on hands and knees. He moved slowly and he kept an eye on the guard. Once he thought the man was looking at him, but he made no move. Harry felt his heart pounding against his ribs with a noise he felt sure would arouse the camp. He crawled on, out of the circle of dim light thrown by the candle set in the cut half of a can. After this he got to his feet and walked quickly into the deep shadows.

He made his way to the horse corral where he knew saddled animals were kept always ready. He took the first he came to, slipped on a bridle that was hanging from a peg in a post and he threw himself into the saddle. The horse snorted loudly, and the loose animals nearby shied away, tails high, hooves heavy against the packed ground. Harry reached down, opened the gate, then sunk his heels in the animal's flanks. It jumped out in a burst of speed and he bent low to dodge the slashing branches of the trees along the creek. From behind him came a startled yell.

He looked back in time to see the door of the cabin open. Paula, a robe tight around her slight body, stood there, her hair falling loose over her shoulders. He felt a quick thrill stab through him—almost a desire to go back. Then lumbering out of the shadows came Pancho Garcia. He had a rifle in his hands.

The loud curses of Pancho ripped through the narrow Canyon of the Red Rocks and the rifle snapped to his shoulder with a speed borne of long practice. Harry tried to pull himself deeper into

the saddle. He watched the rifle with the fascination of a squirrel watching a snake. There was a sharp cry from Paula Urbanos. She moved swiftly, and he saw the flash of the rifle blast. The bullet thudded harmlessly into the hill. She was struggling with Pancho for possession of the rifle.

It was not a release from fear that swept through him now. It was not the sinking weakness of a man who has received a stay from death. Rather it was a singing lightness that brought a surge of power and stung his eyes with tears. He swerved the horse into the brush and broke through onto the trail that led up the ridge.

At the top of the first rise he paused to look back. He was no longer afraid to outline himself against the heavy moon that silvered the brush around him. He could see down into the clearing. Paula stood there, and Pancho and the rest of the men were at her side. He turned the horse and made a full run toward freedom.

And where the trail joined the rutted road across the hill Harry Travers dismounted. The summer daylight was on the hills now and the night dew was sweet in the fast drying grass. He dismounted, looped the reins around the saddle horn, headed the horse back toward the Canyon of the Red Rocks and slapped him sharply across the rump with the palm of his hand.

On foot, Harry Travers headed down the road toward Calabasas. He was dead-ly serious, but a singing kept humming inside him and once it spilled over in a whistled tune. And when the sun came up across the hills it threw a pink cast on the white dust.

## VII

USUALLY AT THIS HOUR CAL-  
abasas was steeped in the perspiring open-mouthed slumber of a hot summer morning. Dogs, with noses between paws, should have been in from their night of prowling and roosters through with their morning alarms. It was not yet time for the flies to bestir themselves to speckle the refuse piles.

The air was sticky with the first blast



of the sun and the dust was cool with the lingering of the night. And Harry Travers wondered how much he should tell of The Canyon of the Red Rocks. The unaccustomed stir of activity he found made the decision for him. If he had any regard for the life of Paula Urbanos he would tell nothing.

For it was in the air, all around him, pulsing like the throb of a drum, disturbing the usual calm. In front of the main General Merchandise store men hurriedly stuffed supplies in a dozen pack saddles. From the insides of the four saloons blasts of voices cracked out over shots and bottles, a weird sound at this hour of the morning. At the edge of town, behind a white picket fence, two women stood, their hands twisted in their apron. Men's voices were a tone lower and a shade louder and they walked with the stiff-legged awareness that told of their sudden consciousness of the importance of being a man.

Activity and anticipation lay over the town of Calabasas. It could have been the making up of a gold stampede, except that the ribald jesting was missing. A veiled intentness marked it for what it was. Men in their primitive state. Men, questing the blood of other men.

**E**LBOWING his way to the sagging adobe where he and his companions had taken rooms, he heard it on every side of him as men charged their own furnaces with blood-encrusted tales of Los Coyotes. For every ten feet of street and sidewalk there was at least one self-appointed orator with his small cluster of listeners. City-bred Angelenos, for the most part. Derbied, fist-against-palm fighters who would be saddle-sore in five miles and ready to give up the chase at the first smell of gunsmoke.

But at this stage they were useful, for they could quote the editorials that had been appearing for a year in the newspapers and they could make them sound like fresh ideas of their own making. They had a way of making the death of the station keeper's wife sound more heinous than it was, and they had a way of insinuating it was not a bullet alone that had killed her. These were the instigators; the doers were there in the cantinas

putting a shaving edge on their kill instinct with the whetstone of whiskey.

Harry Travers estimated that there were at least a hundred and fifty men in this posse that had sworn themselves to clear Southern California of the scourge of Los Coyotes. Of this number perhaps a fourth would never get into saddles. Another fourth would drop out the minute the posse left the traveled road. But if only fifty remained on a determined search there was no doubt that they would in time come on the hiding place of Los Coyotes. And when they did there would be another fifty at least who would gladly come baying in for the kill.

Harry Travers felt contaminated by the time he reached the adobe where he found Tony Ferris and Willard McCauley feverishly changing into serviceable saddle clothes, talking unfamiliarly of lynch ropes and guns while Guy Larrimer studiously cleaned the breech of his rifle.

For a full five seconds they stared at Harry Travers when he came through the door. Then they gave a wild whoop of relief, followed by a combined "Where the hell have you been?"

He tried to stall by countering with questions about the mob that was making its lusty formation there in the street. And between that and their own prompting he gave then an answer about going to Los Angeles to check up on a few details that Pancho Garcia had dug up. In the fever of the manhunt the answer held up and was not questioned. In the glare of a more sensible moment it would have fallen flat before these three who had a way of sniffing out a falsehood.

Tony Ferris said, "As I was telling Willard here, I haven't changed my opinion but you sure have to hand it to this Garfo for the way he's taken over here!"

"All he's done is feed more draught to a fire that was already burning," said the more practical Guy Larrimer. "You won't love him so much by the time we're through taking the Rancho away from him. You're going to put up the money, you know."

"Business is business and it doesn't mean we'll be any easier on him," Willard McCauley said in way of an argument. "But give the man credit where it's due. It's costing him plenty to pay for the supplies for this mob."



"And I bought this bottle before I knew he was standing treat!" said Tony Ferris disgustedly.

Harry Travers walked around in a daze, battered back and forth by conjectures of what it would seem to kill a man. Pushed by answers that it would be a genuine pleasure to do away with any member of Los Coyotes.

"There's one they call White Eye," Tony Ferris said. "They say he was with Joaquin Murietta. It was him and not Three-Fingered Jack that used to tie the pigtails of Chinamen together and then cut their throats to see them kick!"

"They say that woman up there was hacked all to hell before she died."

Harry Travers was getting slowly sick. Here were men whom he had considered apart from the average two-legged animal who walked the streets with his eyes on the gutter. These were men who had ideals big enough to make them self-sufficient and untouched by the mob. These were men with attainable sets of values. Men who could be as ribald as the next but could thrill to Shelley. Men whose intrigues had added a sparkle to the cloistered lives of too many *senoritas*, yet men who would stand in humble silence before a painting of The Sistine Madonna. They had come to Calabasas seeking a world of their own where they could be as they wanted to be. And now Harry Travers the poet saw them for the first time. They were no different than the man in the street.

He saw them fired by the same primitive emotions that fed Christians to the lions or bulls to the matador. Someone had cried "blood," and they were ready to take up the scent. He had thought he would reason with them, and in time he would tell them that Paula Urbanos was alive and would soon return to Calabasas to take legal possession of the Rancho that was hers. There had even been a haunting long-range vision where with water rights from the Rancho, Paula Urbanos and the Big Four would live as neighbors and friends. He had hoped it would be more than that . . .

THERE was the long legal battle with Vincent Garfo ahead, but he knew he could win it for the girl, for with

the aid of these friends of his who had logic and reason on their side it would be a different thing for Garfo to face than when he had met old Tiburcio Urbanos, hot-headed and unsure, challenging legality with a gun there in the streets of Calabasas. But now any such sensible plan was gone. Now his allies were willing to ride stirrup to stirrup with Vincent Garfo. Hungry to chase down a wild band that was no more than a legend on which was hung every unsolved crime that happened from the Tehachapies to San Diego.

He turned and left the room, needing air, and behind him Willard McCauley yelled, "Hey, Harry! Garfo's furnishing the horses, too. Go on up to the livery stable and get one before all the good ones are taken!"

He nodded dully and went out into the blast of sunshine. The orators were still at work, stalking down the sidewalks, stopping suddenly as a new idea hit them, waving their arms, shaking a fist in the air, always finding an audience. The saloons were beginning to spew out the fighting men. Bearded men, smooth-shaven men, rough-clad men and finely-dressed men. Sadistically cruel bone-crushing giants and calm thin-faced killers. Most dangerous of all were the professional bounty hunters who kept to themselves talking in low tones, idly coiling rope or fiddling with the bullets in their gun belts.

"And if that don't work we'll burn the damn hills!" a curbstone orator shouted nearly in Harry Traver's ears.

"Vincent Garfo jest sent in a whole wagon load of shot-guns!"

A wagon load—! Everything in superlatives! But there was a wild scramble toward the end of the street. Anything with which to blast, kill, and maim. Los Coyotes. Murdering, throat-cutting rapists who struck by night. No home was safe and no woman was free to walk upon the streets. The crimes were legion, and they grew in sticky bloodiness with the heat of day and the fumes of whiskey. With others Harry Travers selected a horse, and when others cursed he cursed. And to each, "Ain't that what you say, by God?" he nodded full agreement.

But while the blood-hungry mob settled



and twisted behind him and his own friends became deeper enmeshed in the coils, Harry Travers rode unnoticed up the Topanga road and spurred the horse paid for by Vincent Garfo into a full run. He held it that way until he was past the Ranchito of Tiburcio Urbanos. Four times during the day he had to stop to let the animal rest. But by late afternoon he had topped the ridge and was challenged by the look-out and he knew he was on the trail to The Canyon of the Red Rocks where a girl with an elfin face worried because people said there was blood on the hands of Los Coyotes.

### VIII

HE KNEW THAT A DOZEN rifles covered his approach to the Canyon of the Red Rocks, but somehow it made little difference. What did matter was the fact that he felt so helplessly alone, for in the last twenty-four hours a world of paper cards had blown down and crashed around him and he had not been ready for the collapse. An impractical dreamer, the world had been made of silk and honey. Now for the first time he saw the sweat and blood.

Where the cliffs squeezed in to a narrow passage two guards came out in the open and rode behind him with rifles across their pommels. He held his hands high to show he was unarmed, and in that way he rode into the clearing and saw the cabin against the rocks and the smoke stains of the natural fireplace. He felt listlessly suspended between imagination and reality, and then Pancho Garcia and Paula Urbanos were standing there in front of him and life began to pound in his temples and he was aware of the fact that his eyes were stinging from lack of sleep. He dismounted slowly and walked forward. Pancho Garcia's wrist turned slightly and he pressed the point of a knife against Harry Traver's middle. But Harry Travers did not see it. He was watching the girl.

And in those few seconds of silence, touched only by the slight stir of the leaves and the faint voice of the stream, that half-dream world of the Dons ceased to exist for Harry Travers. Those halcyon days of gold in the creeks and cattle

on a thousand hills were swept away by the roar of the industrial giant that was taking hold and shaping the destiny of a new California. And in such a society each man must make his way alone, fighting for what he would possess and fighting to hold it. She was standing there before him, waiting for his voice, and he knew what he must do. She was the thing he must possess and hold, and in so doing her rights would become his to defend. He would fight for them ever against men who in that dream had been his friends, if need be, for from now on this girl must come first. This was his destiny. It was in his voice when he spoke, and the effect of it was reflected in the widening of Pancho Garcia's eyes. The old man's hand moved and he returned the knife to the sash around his middle.

Harry Travers moved swiftly then, and there was the sharp bite of authority in his voice. He formed his plans as he spoke, and he was amazed at how easily the decisions formed, just as if his life had molded to this moment. But every word was tempered with consideration for her, and every decision was framed to meet her approval.

There were a dozen men in all when they had gathered there in the clearing. And, looking them over, Harry Travers saw that the idealistic innocence of these men must exist mostly in the naive mind of Paula Urbanos, but instead of angering him it made him love her more because he could still remember his own dreams. Petty horse thieves and men who found the supply wagons of Vincent Garfo an easy way to eat, for the most part.

Only in Pancho Garcia and the five who stood nearest him did the fanatic power of vengeance burn. These five, Harry Travers decided rightly, were men who had worked with the belief that it was their destiny to save pastoral California from the wheels of the Yankee trader. And they were all the more dangerous because their ardor had been held in check by this girl who remained as their symbol of indignities. It was to Pancho Garcia and these five that Harry Travers spoke of the mob that was forming in Calabasas.

"We haven't got a chance if we stay here," Harry Travers said, leaving no doubt now that he was casting his fate



with theirs. "They'll hunt us down like so many rats, and if they can't drive us out in any other way they'll fire the hills. So this is the end of Los Coyotes and the thing for us to do is scatter in a dozen directions. No one positively put blame on you as individuals. Those who think it best can circle back and join in the hunt; some can cut on across the hills to the beach and ride down the ocean front to Santa Monica. Others can take the trails north to Buenaventura."

"And the little lizard?" said Pancho Garcia softly.

"Is my responsibility," said Harry Travers. "I'll see that the necessary papers are filed and when things quiet down she can come back and say she's been in Mexico. The Rancho will be hers."

"Not as long as Vincent Garfo lives," said Pancho Garcia.

IT was a moment of decision. Harry Travers could see it in the eyes of the five men who seemed to physically weld themselves closer to Pancho Garcia at this moment. "I tell you the law will take care of Vincent Garfo," Harry Travers snapped, his voice raw.

"My little lizard is not safe as long as he lives," Pancho Garcia said doggedly.

Paula Urbanos, aware of the plan that was forming in the old man's mind, stepped forward quickly and took one of his hands in both of hers. "You must listen to what he says, Pancho. He is trying to help us."

Pancho Garcia smiled down at her and shook his head slowly, "Always your heart is too big for your head, little lizard. How many times have I told you this?" He spoke rapidly in Spanish, and the five fanatically loyal men moved quickly. Harry Travers took Pancho Garcia roughly by the shoulder and spun him around.

"I told you there's a hundred and fifty men in that posse," Harry snapped angrily.

"Si, I heard you," said Pancho Garcia. "But there is only one Vincent Garfo."

"You're crazy, you fool!" Harry Travers shouted. "Gather your men and get out of these hills while you've got a chance!"

Pancho Garcia's cheeks seemed to sag. Deep furrows appeared from the sides of his flat nose and ran diagonally to the cor-

ners of his mouth. He spoke with his teeth clamped tightly together. "You talk with the tongue of a parrot, Harry Travers," he said softly. "Suddenly you open your eyes and because the stars are shining in them you say you are in love. You do not know what it means, Harry Travers. For two years I have seen my little lizard hiding here in the rocks like an animal, and for two years I have watched Vincent Garfo spit on the floors in the Casa and sleep with his dirty boots in the bed that was made for my little girl. For two years I have watched his too many herders go across the valley and when they come back they had much gold and blood on their clothes. And then Vincent Garfo would walk up and down and say, 'It is Los Coyotes that do these things!'" The old man stopped. His dull brown eyes seemed to be completely filmed over and his face was a pasty grey. His shoulders moved softly in rhythm with his breathing. His voice was still soft when he continued. "When you have seen things like this you know what you must do, Harry Travers. As long as Vincent Garfo lives there can be nothing. Today I give the orders to Los Coyotes and I know the orders that must be given!"

The girl ran forward, calling the old man's name, but Harry Travers knew that it would be as senseless to try and stop him now as had been Vincent Garfo's effort to stop the Big Four Land and Water Company on their search for Utopia. He took the girl and held her in his arms and she sobbed against his chest. He read the worry and the pleading in her tear-streaked face, and he kissed her, reassuring her. But when Pancho Garcia and his twelve men rode out of the Canyon of the Red Rocks Harry Travers rode with them. It was what she expected of her man.

And as they rode along the floor of a twisting canyon Harry Travers had a chance to see the face of each man that rode in that band and he wondered how many would be in the saddle tonight. Of those twelve men at least seven would not stop to consider whether or not they would die when they thought of the future of Paula Urbanos. Pancho Garcia, the five who had been the vaqueros of Tiburcio Urbanos, and Harry Travers, who had



once been a poet who dealt in dreams.

He reached across now and took the rifle that Pancho Garcia offered him and the cold of its metal was not the stuff of which dreams are built. He dropped it into the scabbard that hung from his saddle horn and his right hand settled to the butt of the Walker Colt the girl had returned to him. That too, was a solid thing.

## IX

AT THE TOP OF THE RIDGE they paused and looked down at the long line of horsemen who rode in the shadow of the stringy dust cloud that laid in the air. A mile from Rancho Urbanos, Harry Travers figured, and he saw the strategy of wily old Pancho.

In spite of the grimness of their mission a half-holiday mood would hang over that gigantic posse until such a time as blood stained their play. They'd turn in at the Rancho, and Vincent Garfo would again hide his own misdeeds with the plentiful covering of public approval by opening the wine cellars. This was the time to strike, while the mob still talked of big things and tangled itself in its own arms and legs. A swift slicing blow with every gun aimed for Vincent Garfo alone, then a quick break back into the brush that these men knew so well. Some would escape, some would not. It was the chance they would take if they were to put an end to this Vincent Garfo.

Pancho Garcia called a council of war, and he gave orders rapidly for the band to split, half to go with Harry Travers and half with himself. This trust was compensation enough for the decision Harry Travers had made. They dismounted then, watered the horses and laid their plans carefully and as they did Harry Travers wormed out the full story of Vincent Garfo.

It had been nearly a year, Pancho Garcia said, before he was sure that it was Vincent Garfo and his men who were responsible for the many robberies that took place in the Ventura road and on the stages in the canyon of Little St. Francis. But by that time, the legend of Los Coyotes had grown to where there was no stopping it, and by that time Vincent Garfo had bought his way firmly into the con-

fidence of the good people of Calabasas.

And like Tiburcio Urbanos who had held no time for the law that was a vague thing in far off Los Angeles and did not reach here in the Santa Monica mountains, Pancho Garcia knew he must make his own law with Vincent Garfo. He had pleaded with Paula Urbanos, but for many months after the death of her father the little lizard had not been well and Pancho Garcia was more concerned with catering to her wishes than he was with letting more blood. Some day the right time would come and Pancho Garcia and Vincent Garfo would be alone . . .

But where once Paula Urbanos had planned on going back and taking the land that was hers now came the realization that she had gone too far. Sometimes she awoke at night, remembering that she had held the head of her dead father, there in the dust of the Calabasas street. Sometimes, Pancho Garcia said, she would cry and say there was blood on her skirt. Pancho Garcia's eyes became heavy. "But never," he said, "did the little lizard give orders to rob or kill. It was tried once by a hot-headed one who would win her favors. Valermo, we called his name . . ."

These things Pancho Garcia managed to tell as he drew a rude map of the Rancho and said how they would ride in by the two canyons and meet there by the main house.

He told them in much the same way a father might mention his daughter's lovable shortcomings while giving his consent to a bashful swain. And then they shook hands, Harry Travers and Pancho Garcia, and they knew that after the death of Vincent Garfo one of them must go back to the Canyon of the Red Rocks—.

**T**IMING. That was the thing now. Harry Travers held his men back, for it would be worse to get there too soon than not to get there at all. At the exact moment Pancho Garcia and his men came out of the north canyon, then Harry Travers must come from the south. There would be light in the sky, for the moon would come full and early tonight. But it would be the big fires that would show where the men gathered. They were to leave their horses close by, then walk in and mingle with the crowd. Vincent Gar-

fo and a handful of leaders would be in the main house. Of this they were nearly certain.

With the evening the fog came slowly in from the ocean and it rested in the dark bottoms of the canyons. Here, from a higher level, it could be seen winding solidly like a phantom river and the full moon came up and laid heavily on it and touched it with puffs and shadows. Above the fog the night was clear and one by one the brightest of the inquisitive stars came to peer from the tops of the highest ridges. The day's heat, smouldering up from the floor of the valley, met the coolness of the fog and Harry Travers felt the shiver run through his body.

The glare of the fires, now. The grotesque shapes of the men with their hulking shadows shifting into the deeper darkness. In the satisfying fragrance of the dry grass a million crickets sawed out a senseless symphony and played a two-measure rest when Harry Travers and his men moved down the creek canyon toward the sheep camp of Vincent Garfo where city-bred men talked of blood and killing.

They dismounted silently, Harry Travers and his five men. They separated without a word, for they knew their parts well, and in time he saw them mingle unnoticed into the crowd. Harry himself went toward the main house, the muscles across his back aching with tenseness, praying at every step that he would not meet Willard McCauley nor Guy Larrimer nor Tony Ferris—.

From one fire a dozen voices failed to blend as they beat away at a song. From another the discord of a loud argument and from a third a self-appointed orator still stirred the devil-brew with his blood talk.

At the east end of the porch he waited for two minutes. Three men passed him, and as they did one of them changed the angle of his straw sombrero. Only three. Already two had deserted. He wondered how many Pancho Garcia had left. A faint call of an owl— He crossed the black shadows of the porch and the door latch lifted easily in his hand. The door opened noiselessly on its leather hinges.

He knew the long corridor like a map, for Pancho Garcia had not missed a de-

tail. There to the left was the living room with the big fireplace. Split-second timing. He paused only long enough to take a half-dozen breaths and Pancho Garcia was standing there beside him, having come in from the opposite end of the through corridor. They drew pistols, cocked them, and took a final deep breath. Whoever was in that room must die now; they pushed open the door. There by the fireplace stood Vincent Garfo, the bandit chief who posed as a sheep man. He was pouring red wine for Tony Ferris, Willard McCauley and Guy Larrimer.

IT would have been over then in a few seconds. This was not the time for a conscience. Pancho Garcia had schooled him well, and there with Paula Urbanos in his arms he had known that if he were to take her it must be this way. But now he could see only the startled eyes of three men who were still his friends, regardless of their decisions or their human failings. He lurched sideways then and his shoulder caught Pancho Garcia in the ribs just as the Mexican's gun spit flame.

He saw Willard McCauley spill over a table and drop behind it for protection. Tony Ferris moved swiftly out of the line of fire. Guy Larrimer tugged a six-shooter from his belt. Two more shots from Pancho Garcia— Surprise, coupled with protection outside the corridor, that is the way it had been planned. But now Vincent Garfo was still alive and the surprise element was gone. A thud of running feet and cries of alarm. Then Vincent Garfo had snatched a shotgun from the corner of the room and emptied both barrels. Some of the shot stung Harry Travers in the thigh. He was stumbling along blindly, following Pancho Garcia down the corridor to where their men waited to cover their escape.

The deep-throated roar of men scenting the first blood seemed to choke the night. Wild firing and yells broke out at different spots. There was the scream of a man wounded. Then steady high-pitched cursing. Harry recognized one of Los Coyotes, running. *One of my own men, he kept thinking. One of my own men.* There was the deep growl of a shotgun and the man went end over end and slid on his face. A wild triumphant yell—



They reached the screen of brush, but the panicked horses had pulled loose from their pickets and there was no time to catch them up. They ran on, stumbling. He and Pancho Garcia, Harry cursing himself for his softness, Pancho cursing him with his silence. More shots. Then, distinctly, came the orders: "Get your horses! Fan out! Hell, they haven't got a chance!"

An hour of lying on the ground with his heart thudding against the dry leaves until he reached under with his hand and scraped them aside, fearful that his pursuers might hear the sound. The snapping of a twig, the pushing aside of the brush. A half-animal cry, then full realization. There, not three feet away, Vincent Garfo stood, the shotgun in his hand.

Harry Travers bunched his muscles and lunged, his arms closing around Vincent Garfo's ankles. The shotgun exploded harmlessly. They hit the ground and rolled, sprang apart and they were both on their feet. He knew Garfo's hand was going toward his belt. He felt his own fingers curl around the butt of that Walker Colt.

Once. Twice. The thud of the gun butt against the palm of his hand was a powerful thing that flowed through him like liquid fire. Every bloody tale he had heard today. Every exaggerated moment of suffering. It was all in his finger as he squeezed the trigger and saw Vincent Garfo stagger back under the impact of the lead, half turn, and fall heavily. Blood. Harry Travers, the poet, was no different than any other man.

But it was only a second that he stood there, then animal instinct took hold. There would be a dozen men run this way to investigate the shots. It would mean a break in the line that had been circling around them. He waited until he heard the first calls, then the cracking of brush, then he calculated where the opening would be and ran that way. As he did he called Pancho, over and over, knowing that the name was common enough that no one would suspect it was a fugitive calling to his friend, for now at least a dozen voices were calling back and forth.

He found the old man lying in the water of the creek. He helped him to his feet and Harry kept saying, "He's dead,

Pancho. He's dead!" Then they were gliding out into the brush shadows of the night, pausing only once when they found the horses left by the possemen who had broken the line.

They went on, swiftly. Stars were less bright, though the moon had gone, and there was a rim of light across the hills when they went down the slope toward the Canyon of the Red Rocks.

## X

SO HE HAD KILLED A MAN, AND even when he held her in his arms and covered her face with kisses he felt the difference within him. Thoughts now came and went swiftly, unclouded by sentimentality. Decisions were quick and crystal clear.

Pancho Garcia seemed suddenly years old, a thing out of the past that was dead. He sat there dully, holding Paula's hand in the way a child clings to its mother. He kept mumbling under his breath, saying nothing.

"They couldn't have gotten them all," Harry Travers said, pacing back and forth across the room of the cabin. "Some of them must have gotten away, and if they did they'll come back here!"

"Pepe. Ramon. Alberto. Gomez. Alvarado." Pancho Garcia tolled the names off slowly. "If one of these is alive he will come back to see that the little lizard is all right. The others?" He shook his head. "I cannot tell."

But only two came back. Alvarado and Alberto, though Alvarado lived only long enough to be taken from his horse. "They start to ride in another hour," said Alberto in Spanish. "They say they will take no chances. They will kill every man they find in these hills, for every man here is a thief of some kind and even if he is not he has given shelter and help to Los Coyotes. Even if he is not one of us he deserves to be killed. This is what they say, and they say that this way they will miss none. They talk of burning the hills!"

There was no mark of emotion in the voice of Paula Urbanos when she spoke. She said, "Don't they know that men live here with their wives and children? Are they to be condemned because they do

not build a house on the main highway? The turkey raisers have more luck with their birds here in the hills——”

“Some argued this way,” said Alberto. “I could hear their words. The others say it is best to kill every man. Those who spoke this way had the most voices.”

SHE came to Harry Travers then and he took her in his arms and held her. She had come to him for protection and comfort and he knew that from now on it must always be like this. Fugitives, perhaps, forever, but together always, clinging to each other. Her eyes asked him to tell her that the words of Alberto meant nothing, but he could not force himself to tell her the lie. He said, “I’ve seen them, Paula. After last night they will stop at nothing.”

“But why?” She said it so softly it seemed she talked to herself. “The men are all gone. Dead or scattered. There is no more Los Coyotes. What do they want?”

“A mob must kill a figurehead. A leader.” He said it bitterly, speaking his thoughts aloud without meaning to. Then he felt the cold spur of horror that went through him when he realized what he had said and saw the slow wave of understanding come into her eyes. He took her face between the palms of his hands, pressed until he knew he was hurting her, but he could not stop. His throat was dry and his voice raspy when he said, “No, Paula. I would kill you myself first.”

“It is my fault,” she said dully. “It is my fault these men are dead. They are right when they seek the leader of Los Coyotes.”

For the first time in over an hour Pancho Garcia bestirred himself. He said, “Paula! You speak like a crazy little fool! Your brain is sick again like it was the night your father died!”

She said, “It was my fault that you and the others came away with me.”

“You made *bandidos* of no one!” the old man shouted fiercely. “Myself—the others—we have wanted it this way, stealing the supplies from Vincent Garfo. It made little difference. These things are not of your doing! Listen to Pancho! You must not talk this nonsense, for this is the time to say goodbye, Alberto and

myself we will go toward Ventura. You and Senor Travers must ride for Santa Monica.”

“That’s right, Paula,” Harry Travers said eagerly. “We’ve got time if we start now.”

“And the men of the hills who raise the turkeys? They are to pay for my mistakes?” She smiled now and shook her head. “Always, men will search for the real leader of Los Coyotes!”

“I’ll prove in court that it was Vincent Garfo,” Harry said, his voice rising.

“You forget Vincent Garfo and I have met before. He would say it is only a personal fight. No, Harry, but thank you for your love.” She turned and started toward the corral.

He had never felt such desperation. He felt like slapping her face, hard. Instead he grasped her shoulders and shook her, but even as he did he knew it was useless. Here was more than the decision of a fanatic, for it was tempered with hysteria.

“Pancho, you and Alberto go, and *vaya con Dios*.”

“Paula! Damn you! You’re being an idiotic little fool!” He slapped her across the face. He saw her recoil from the blow, but the hard dry eyes told him he had not shaken her from her hysterical decision.

Again the deep furrows appeared in the cheeks of Pancho Garcia and his eyes took on their filmed hardness. Harry Travers did not see the blow start. He only knew that again Pancho Garcia’s pistol barrel had cracked against his skull. And like that night in Calabasas he felt the earth come up and hit him and explode in stars around his head.

There were sounds. A million of them. Paula’s scream, he thought, or was that only the rush of blood in his head? A thunder of hooves . . . a thousand horses . . . He kept fighting against the blackness—fighting—until at last he won and raised himself to hands and knees, pausing a moment, shaking his head. And then it all came back. A fool decision Paula Urbanos had made to give herself up as the leader of Los Coyotes.

He got to his feet, swaying drunkenly, yet savagely sure that he must overtake her and stop her. He tried to get his



bearings to find the horse corral, and then he saw her there in the dirt in front of the cabin. Her hands and feet were tied and a handkerchief had been knotted and stuffed in her mouth. He untied her hurriedly and she said one word, "Pancho!" And then he knew.

THEY rode hurriedly, but it was little use. Twice, far ahead, they saw the dust puff that marked the passage of old Pancho Garcia and loyal Alberto on some exposed switch-back there ahead. But still Harry Travers and Paula Urbanos goaded their horses forward, hoping that some freak of fate might give them time. Then, below, they saw the twin columns of the posse coming up the dual ruts of the road that ended there in the lower reaches of Topanga. And on the little knoll, a few hundred yards from the end of the road, they saw Pancho Garcia and Alberto ride out of the thicket and pause, waiting for that advancing column. Paula and Harry beat futilely upon their jaded animals, but by the time they had reached the top of the knoll the twin column was at the end of the road and Pancho Garcia and Alberto were riding down like two plumed knights.

The breeze shifted slightly, and the sweet scent of the dry grass was gone and in its place came the stench of man-sweat and animal-sweat mixed with the burden of wine breaths and tobacco. A grumbled of words, the slap of rifles being pulled from saddle boots. The constant squeaking of leather.

Pancho Garcia was standing up in his stirrups now, leaning slightly forward, both hands on the broad Spanish horn of his saddle. They heard him laugh, then his voice came clearly. "I hear you seek the leader of Los Coyotes! Well, my friends, I am here! Pancho Garcia!"

A hundred and fifty men. A hundred and fifty sets of nerves unstrung. A hundred and fifty fingers unconsciously wanting to pull a trigger. There was no way of telling who fired the first shot and there was no way of telling how many shots there were in all. Two bodies jerked, first one way, then the other. They fell. A foot caught in a stirrup and a plunging horse dragged a dead body until a bullet

stopped the horse. A thundering wave of gunsmoke, clouded with blood. Then it was over and a hundred and fifty men were left with a hundred and fifty sicknesses in the pits of as many stomachs.

And then they saw them there on the knoll—Harry Travers holding Paula Urbanos close while she sobbed brokenly and would not stop. He faced them defiantly, ready to meet anything they had to offer, ready to accept any challenge. It was Willard McCauley, the political rebel, who stepped out of the mass of "the people." He was strangely pale as he stood there alone, facing Harry Travers. Guy Larrimer and Tony Ferris came to stand beside him.

THE mob stood silently, glad now to take no responsibility, willing to claim anyone as the leader, ready to spend the rest of their lives saying they had done their duty. And with his arm tight around Paula Urbanos Harry Travers raised his eyes and met the level gaze of his three *compadres*. He said, "This is Paula Urbanos, the legal owner of the Rancho. Since she has been found there can be no further dispute about the land."

At the mention of her name the crowd pushed closer. There was the quick mumble of those who recognized her and the sharper voice of those who had to be convinced. Tony Ferris and Guy Larrimer turned quickly, and something in their eyes brought silence again.

And after awhile Willard McCauley offered his hand. As he gripped that of Harry Travers he said loud enough for those nearest to hear, "I'm glad you found her, Harry. We had about given up hope." His voice rose some and then he added, "There's been hell in Calabasas the last few days and it's just as well you and the girl were nowhere near to be part of it."

It was strange that at this moment Harry Travers should again think of poetry. But now it was an epic poem metered by the heart beats of men like Guy Larrimer and Tony Ferris and Willard McCauley.

The breeze shifted again, and it took away the smell of men and horses and brought back the perfume of the grass and lingering scent of last night's fog.



# THE DUDE HANGS HIGH

*By Joseph Chadwick*

He wuz a hongry-lookin' critter from the East a-ways—plumb anxious tuh ride into every kinda trouble like a real cowpoke. The great and glorious West didn't disappoint him none.

CATTLE BAWLING, COW-punchers yelping. Horses snorting, ropes slapping. Smoke curling from branding fires, running-irons glowing red. Dust sparkling in the sunlight, hazing the confused yet methodical scene. The smell of burnt hair coming sharp to a man's nostrils as the JC brand marked a thousand longhorns, one by one . . . A better picture, to Jim Channel's eyes, than any artist could paint.

A rider swung out of the dust, saying, "Twenty more to go, Mr. Channel."

Young Mr. James Arthur Channel nodded, grinned. He was watching it all from horseback, his eyes aglow. For the cattle being branded were his cattle, as of today. He wore a wide-brimmed hat and high-heeled boots, like the dozen other riders, but he had yet to exchange his handsome tweed suit for range clothes. He had only recently transplanted himself from Philadelphia to the Llano Estacado.

The deal was made with Steve Maury, the younger and trickier of that pair of Texans; Clint Maury, the real boss of the MAB being away on a horse-buying trip at the time. Jim Channel paid in cash. He also paid Steve Maury to have the MAB crew do the branding. He watched every critter get the new JC mark burned on it, so that the tally was right. He didn't know anything about cattle raising, but he was banker cautious.

His herd was turned out onto the open range, like every other outfit's cattle, to graze and increase, and Jim made ready to pull out.

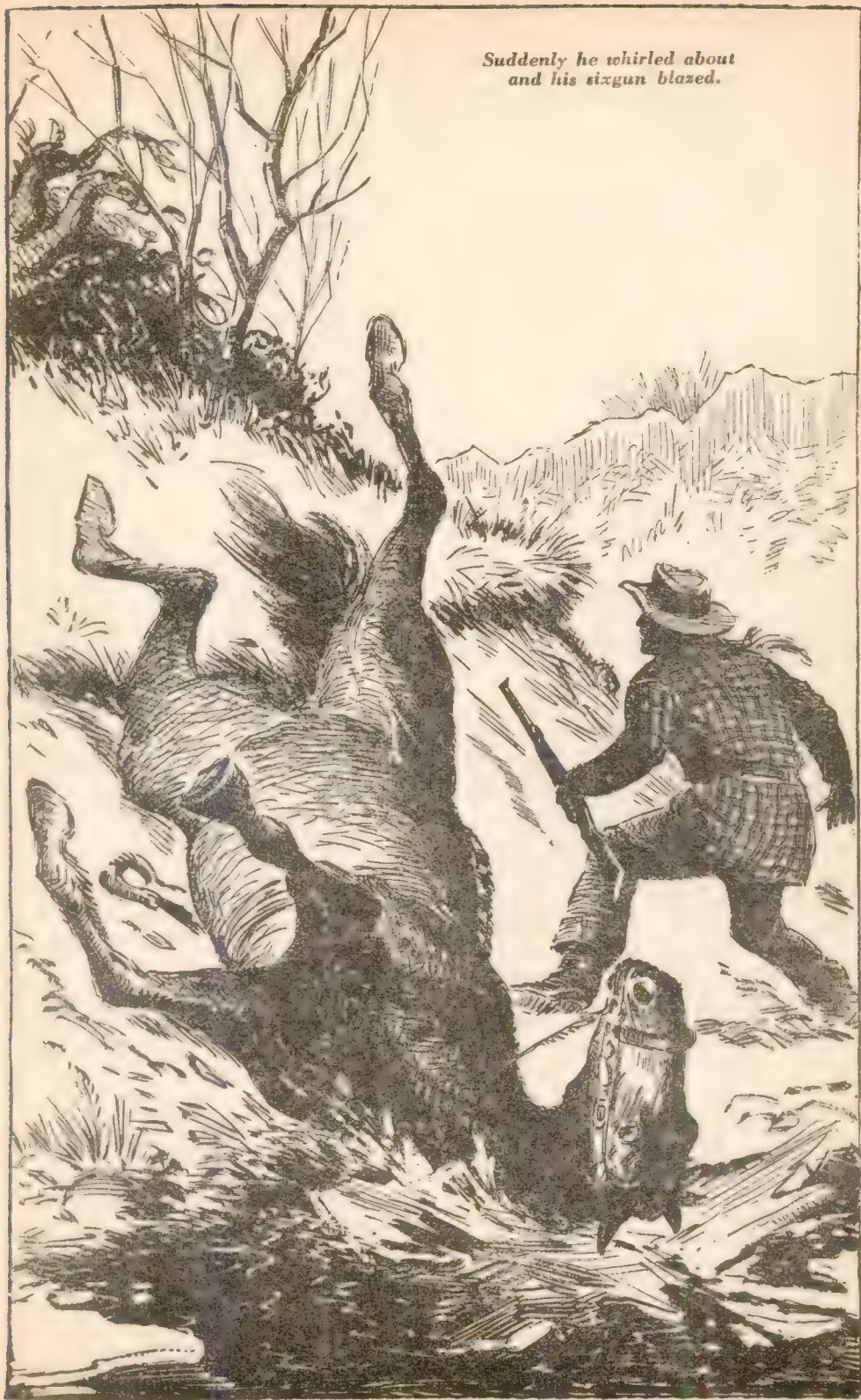
"Leaving so soon?" Steve Maury asked.

Jim nodded. "I want to get my ranch headquarters under roof before winter comes," he said, in that mild way he had of talking.

"Where you holing up?" Steve said. He was a blunt talker, with no scruples against asking another man his business.



*Suddenly he whirled about  
and his sixgun blazed.*



A stocky man in his middle twenties, he had an easy grin and reckless blue eyes. His hair had a reddish tint, and now, in need of a shave, the lower part of his face had a rusty look. "I figured you'd head for Denver or maybe Dodge, and sit out the winter in style."

Jim Channel shook his head, smiled slightly, and said, "No, I'm going to be a real rancher right from the start." He was taller than Steve Maury, but less bulky. He was a couple years older, but lacked the hearty air of self-assurance that Steve affected. "I'll be at Broken Wheel Creek this winter, roughing it."

"Well, here's wishing you luck."

"Thanks. Stop by, if you get up that way."

"Sure. I'll do that," Steve said.

Jim mounted his sorrel horse, caught up the halter rope of his pack mare. Riding away, he lifted a hand to the MAB 'punchers. If he noticed the way they nudged each other and grinned, he didn't suspect that there was a joke — on himself.

**J**IM barely made it before the first snow. But he got a cabin up, and a lean-to barn for his two horses, and provisions in. He had hired a couple of Mexicans from Gomez Plaza to help him with the building, and when they left he settled down to a lonely existence. His nearest neighbor, Sam White's Circle-Bar Ranch, was eighteen miles to the east.

The wind was always howling on the high plains, and now the snow piled up. No riders came by for weeks at a time. It was odd that a city man like Jim Channel could stand such loneliness. He hadn't much to do except cut wood for his fireplace, in the stand of cottonwoods along the creek, and care for his two horses. And keep himself fed. But he had brought a box of books from home, and so passed a lot of time reading. In mild weather, he saddled up and rode out for glimpses of cattle on the snow-blanketed range. If he rode far enough and looked hard enough, he saw an occasional cow of his snow scattered JC herd in a mixed bunch. But mostly he saw MABs, Circle-Bars and other brands. . . . Twice he rode east and visited the Circle-Bar. Sam White welcomed him each time with lukewarm

friendliness, his daughter invited him to stay for supper with her manner suggesting that she didn't care if he did or didn't, and the Circle-Bar hands joshed him because he was a tenderfoot. Jim got the idea that the White outfit wasn't very neighborly, and so after the second visit stayed away.

In mid-December, after a two-day blizzard, the Circle-Bar crew was out to see how the stock had drifted and how many had died. Two of them stopped at Jim's place. They were in a good humor because there was little damage to the herds. They wolfed the grub Jim rustled up, then rolled quirky smokes and crowded the fireplace. Spud Larkin was a quiet sort, but Curly Bates, a baldheaded old rannihan with humorous eyes, was a talker.

"Reckon your JC herd'll be about doubled by spring," Curly said, giving Spud Larkin a wink. "Providing you get a good calf crop."

Jim was lighting his pipe. He forced a grin. He was a solemn sort and found it hard to take a joshing. "You're pulling my leg, Curly," he said.

Spud Larkin chuckled dryly.

Curly said, "You sure Steve Maury didn't sell you all steers? He's a cute one, Steve is. His brother Clint has to watch him day and night, else Steve would cheat him out of the MAB."

"Oh, I don't think Steve's that bad, Curly."

"You don't know him like we do, friend."

"Maybe not," Jim admitted. "But I tallied my bunch, saw each animal branded. I'm familiar with that old maxim, 'let the buyer beware.' I'm sure Steve Maury didn't take advantage of me."

Curly Bates suddenly sobered. He tossed his quirky butt into the fire, rose, pulled on his blanket-lined canvas coat. He looked as though he wanted to say something, but just muttered, "Spud, let's get going." He moved over to the door, but, waiting for his companion who was reluctant to leave the fire, didn't open it. He gazed at Jim Channel, rubbing his whiskery chin with a rope-calloused hand.

"Next time you buy cattle, see Sam White," Curly said. "He's an honest man, if there ever was one."



"I don't doubt his honesty," Jim said. "But he wasn't very friendly toward me."

"Just his way," Curly replied. "He's as surly as a Pecos bear, a lot of the time, but he's got a heart of gold—Big Sam has." The humorous glint came back into his faded old eyes. "Maybe Sam figured you'd come courting his daughter, if he was too friendly," he added. "I heard him say more than once that there's too blamed many buckaroos riding by the Circle-Bar trying to spark Miss Jan."

"The idea never occurred to me," Jim said, grinning.

"Pretty enough, ain't she?"

"Certainly. But her manner toward me was rather aloof."

Curly rubbed his chin some more. "Me, I never figured Jan was that," he said. "Always figured she was a little too bold. Not that she's not a lady. But she was brought up without a mother, since she was a four-year-old, with a bunch of tough cowhands for nursemaids. Maybe she figured you were kind of aloof, yourself, partner. Maybe she thinks you were used to prettier girls back East."

Jim grinned again. "You urging me to court her, Curly?" he asked.

"The fact is," Curly replied, "Janet White asked Spud and me to ride by and see if you came through the blizzard all right."

With that, he and Spud Larkin went out to their horses. They were riding out across the snowy range before Jim got over his surprise that someone at the Circle-Bar should be concerned about him. And afterward, refilling his pipe, he wondered if Curly Bates had really been serious when saying that Steve Maury wasn't to be trusted.

CHRISTMAS DAY, loneliness got its first firm hold on Jim Channel. He was full of memories of other Christmases, at home with his parents and his brother and sister. And his friends. The decorated tree, bright with balls and tinsel and candles—and the gifts beneath it. It was always a merry time at the Channels, the best time of all the year. In the afternoon, had he been back in Philadelphia, Jim would make the rounds calling on friends as charged as he with the holiday spirit. If there was snow, he would

have his team of matched bays hitched to a sleigh . . .

Alone there in his isolated cabin, Jim Channel wondered why he had ever left home. He knew, of course. He hadn't wanted to go into the family bank, like his brother George, and spend a lifetime at the monotonous business of checking people's credit, granting loans, collecting interest, foreclosing on mortgages. He'd wanted adventure. He'd wanted to make his own way, in a hardier manner. Brother George had said, "You're being a fool, Jim." His father had said resignedly, "Well, get it out of your system. I'll give you a fifteen-thousand-dollar loan. When you've squandered it, come back to the bank—and go to work."

*Maybe, Jim told himself, I am being a fool.*

Loneliness had his spirits at low ebb.

He glanced through the cabin's frost-coated window and saw a rider. He grabbed up hat and coat, hurried outside to hail the man—to extend seasonal greetings, if nothing more. But the rider was making straight for his cabin without being called in. He was coming from the east, from the direction of the Circle-Bar. He was riding a pinto horse and packing something bulky on his saddle. It wasn't a man however, Jim now saw, but a girl. It was Sam White's daughter.

"Hello," she called. "Merry Christmas!"

Jim returned the greeting, but not so heartily as he wished. He was a little jolted, unwilling to believe, yet knowing it was true, that Janet White had ridden eighteen miles across the snow drifted range just to make his Christmas pleasant. The girls he had known back East . . . Jim caught up the thought. He'd never known a girl like Janet White. She was smiling when she reined in, and her cheeks were red from the cold.

"We thought you'd drop by the ranch, this being Christmas," she said. "Most folks do, from miles around. When you didn't come, I—or rather, dad—thought it'd be nice to bring you some cookies and candy and things." She untied the bulging flour sack on her saddle horn, handed it to him. She smiled again. "Maybe we should have given you a special invitation."

"Next Christmas I'll know the Whites hold open house."

"Oh, you expect to be around these parts next year?"

"Of course," Jim said, thinking that was a queer question. "Won't you get down and come in a little while?" He didn't know whether it was proper to invite her into his cabin. "To warm up," he added quickly.

Janet gave him an amused look, and said, "Well, if you're sure it's all right," and swung down.

Jim had the thought that she was laughing at him, because of his uncertainty. He told her to go inside, that he would put her horse up in the lean-to. He led the pinto around back, feeling a warm glow of pleasure. The day was turning out right for him, after all. The only thing that spoiled it was the girl's surprised question about his expecting to be here at Broken Wheel Creek next year. She seemed convinced that he was a quitter. *But why?* Jim wondered. He hadn't yet come up against anything that even made him think of quitting.

## II

SHE HAD REMOVED HER MAN-nish hat and coat, and was standing with her back to the fire when Jim came in. She wore faded levis, boots, a flannel shirt. But her mass of tawny blonde hair was enough of a feminine touch to relieve the unattractive clothes. Her eyes were wide, a cool clear gray, and her mouth, full and red, expressive and seemingly pliant, caught and held a man's attention. Her smile revealed small, perfect teeth. Her features were, Jim had to admit, finely molded. The daughter of burly, gruff natured Sam White didn't resemble him except superficially. Janet's warm loveliness came from her long dead mother.

Jim rummaged around in the case of books over at the end of his bunk. He took out a thin volume, the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, and handed it to Janet. "A gift calls for a gift," he said, smiling. "Many happy returns of the day, Janet."

"Thank you, Jim. I'll treasure this, for books are a rare thing in my life." The half-veiled amusement faded from her

eyes. She studied the book's title, leafed through its pages. "But what is it about?"

Jim explained that it was a collection of poems, epigrams and reflections written by a Persian who had lived more than five hundred years ago. He did not tell her that it had become a tradition for men to give the *Rubaiyat* to ladies they admired. But he found himself wanting to tell her just that. Instead, he busied himself with putting a log on the fire and filling the coffee pot. A little later they sat before the fireplace, drank coffee, ate some of the cookies Janet had brought.

They didn't talk much, but their silence wasn't a hostile one. Jim smoked his pipe, and Janet lost herself in the Persian's ancient writings. The cabin was no longer a lonely place. Jim's Christmas no longer lacked contentment . . . The afternoon slipped away. Both were surprised to find shadows creeping into the cabin. Janet closed her book, jumped up.

"I've got to start for home."

"I'll saddle up and ride with you."

Jim put on his hat and coat, but halted at the door when Janet spoke his name. She was frowning now. It took her a little while to speak.

"I came here for more reason than to wish you a Merry Christmas," she said finally. "There's something been bothering me for a long time. It's been on my father's mind too. If we seemed inhospitable when you visited the Circle-Bar, it was because—well, because we were uncomfortable about you."

"I don't understand," Jim said.

"Steve Maury cheated you," Janet told him. "He put one over on you in that cattle deal. The whole countryside knows about it—and is laughing. But I can't see it as a joke, and I can't keep quiet any longer."

"How was I cheated?"

"Your cattle were cold-branded," Janet said. Then, seeing that he did not understand, she explained, "Steve had his crew burn just the hair, not the hide. When spring comes, those cattle will shed their hair—and the JC brand along with it!"

Jim's face turned stiff with anger. He remembered now the sly grins of Steve Maury's branding crew. And Curly Bates's remarks about Steve being a man who couldn't be trusted. He had bought a



thousand head of cattle, but when his cold-branded JC mark wore off those cattle would be back in their original MAB brand. He wouldn't be able to claim them. And Steve Maury had his twelve thousand dollars. A voice in Jim's mind seemed to ask, *Well, what are you going to do about it?* The same question was in Janet White's eyes. He now understood why she doubted that he would be in the cattle country next year this time.

"So Steve's boasting that he put one over on me?"

"Steve didn't tell it," the girl said. "He paid each of the MAB hands who helped with the branding fifty dollars—so they'd keep quiet. He didn't want it known until you found it out for yourself, in the spring when you started looking for calves to brand. But it was too good for the MAB cowpunchers to keep. Some of them talked, and now the story's spread all around."

"And the joke's on me," Jim said.

"Sam White didn't laugh. Nor did I."

"You might have told me sooner."

"It's best not to meddle in a neighbor's affairs," Janet said. "The Maurys are our neighbors, the same as you. Besides, Clint Maury and my father have always been friends. But I . . . Well, a woman isn't bound not to talk by any silly man-made conventions."

Jim didn't know whether she was declaring herself his ally, but her aloofness was gone. Janet no longer looked at him with half mocking amusement. She regarded him pityingly, now, and somehow that was worse. It made Jim Channel feel inadequate, but half a man, and here in the cattle country a tenderfoot was just that.

"What can I do about it?" he asked.

"I don't know, Jim," the girl said. "You'd better ask my father."

"You said that he wouldn't meddle in a neighbor's affairs."

"If you ask Sam White for advice, he'll not turn you down."

"All right," Jim said flatly. "I'll ask him."

He went out for the horses.

THE wintry moon was bright, the wind had a bite to it, and the snowcrust crunched noisily under the horses'

hoofs. They rode stirrup to stirrup, but Janet was silent and Jim lost in a dark mood. His anger was a growing thing. There was hatred in him for Steve Maury, and never before had he hated a man. His sense of inadequacy added to his anger. Back home, he would have known what to do. A swindler could be taken into court, sued, and, if his guilt could be proven, criminal charges could be brought. But here in the plains country the only law was what a man made for himself, and court trials were unheard of. A man who was injured in any way settled matters with a gun. . . . And Jim Channel had never fired a gun in anger in all his life!

They were halfway across the range to the Circle-Bar when Janet said, "Rider coming toward us." The horseman was coming from the direction of the White ranch. A touch of amusement edged the girl's voice, as she added, "I'd gamble that it's Clint Maury. He's visiting the Circle-Bar. If it is he, he'll be in an ugly humor."

"How so?" Jim asked.

"Clint's a man who takes a lot for granted. He figures I'm going to marry him. He won't like my being with you."

"And are you going to marry him?"

"Maybe. Yes, maybe I will—unless a better man comes along," Janet said, and was unaware of Jim's sudden frown. She waved an arm, called out, "Hello, Clint!"

The rider loping toward them did not reply. Clint Maury wasn't in a mood for pleasantries. He was in a black rage, one born of jealousy without a doubt, and he merely jerked his head in a curt nod when the girl introduced him to Jim Channel. He was a tall lean man of about thirty. Jim wouldn't have believed he and Steve were brothers; they were as unlike as day and night. Clint was dark of face, his features all sharp angles, and he had none of Steve's easy good humor. A solemn sort, chill of eye and thin-lipped. He had reined in before Jim and the girl, blocking their way. After that nod, he ignored Jim and stared at Janet.

"You left the Circle-Bar before noon," he said, flat accusation in his voice, "You said you'd be back long before dark."

"I forgot the time, Clint. It wasn't deliberate."

"How'd I know but that something happened to you."

"Now what could happen to me, Clint?"

Maury didn't like her bantering tone. His scowl showed it. "Hell; better riders than you have been thrown and left afoot."

Janet laughed shortly. "Is that all you were worried about?" she asked. "That's not very flattering. I thought you were afraid that Jim might have made advances to me." Her voice took on an edge. "Where I ride, how long I stay, is still nobody's business but mine. Remember that, Clint."

There was a jarring silence.

Jim Channel could almost feel the hostility between Janet White and the man she believed she might marry. It wasn't a thing he understood, but he knew that Clint Maury wasn't the sort even a woman should bait too far. That was another thing Jim could feel: the hard-core toughness of Clint Maury.

"All right," Maury muttered. "Have it your way—for now."

"For now, and for as long as I like," Janet retorted. "That's something we won't quarrel about." She gestured toward Jim without taking her gaze from the other man, and said, "I've told him about it, Clint—about how Steve cheated him."

The moonlight was full on Clint Maury. His face grew sharper, mere rock-hard. He shifted his gaze to Jim Channel. "I don't know that Steve cheated anybody," he stated. "I heard some talk when I got back from San Antone in the fall. If Steve took money off you and gave you nothing in return, that's between you and him."

"It's between me and the MAB," Jim said flatly. "I wanted to buy cattle. I met Steve, and he told me the MAB would sell me all I wanted."

"Nobody deals with the MAB except through me."

"Steve is part-owner of the ranch. That makes it responsible."

"Get this straight," Maury said, grinning now—but without humor. "I own the MAB—lock, stock and barrel—and I've got no partners. Steve Maury works for me—as a ranchhand, for wages." He turned from Jim, as though that settled

the matter as far as he was concerned. And said to Janet, "You riding back with me?"

Janet looked as surprised as Jim Channel. It was clear that she hadn't known that Steve Maury was no part-owner of the MAB. She said slowly, "We'll ride together. Jim's coming to the Circle-Bar to talk with dad—to ask his advice."

"Advice about what?"

"About what he should do about Steve."

Maury showed his humorless grin. "Suits me," he said. "I'd like to hear what kind of advice Sam gives him."

Jim Channel saw that the man was relishing this part of the encounter. *He's eager for what will come of it*, Jim thought. He knew that Clint Maury wasn't going to forget where Janet White had spent the greater part of Christmas Day.

### III

THE THREE OF THEM reached the Circle-Bar just as the group crowded into a buggy and a buckboard—were calling their goodbyes to Sam last of the day's callers — a big White. It was noisy over at the bunkhouse where the hands were still celebrating the holiday. . . . They put their horses up in the barn, then went to the house.

Big Sam White shook Jim's hand in a manner that was friendly enough. He called to the buxom Mexican housekeeper to set out supper for the three. Later, after they had eaten, they joined the Circle-Bar's owner in the comfortable parlor of the big adobe house.

A bulky man of sixty, Sam White was settled in a rocking-chair. His hair and shaggy mustache were iron-gray, his eyes a faded blue. He was mellowed this Christmas night, his gruffness laid aside. He gave his daughter a fond smile, and said, "So you had to bring this thing to a head?"

Janet stood by his chair. She had changed to a dress of soft green material and fixed her hair before supper. She looked wholly feminine, now, and Jim Channel was sure that he had never known any girl so attractive. He tried not to stare at her, yet his eyes kept seeking



her. He sat stiffly on the sofa, feeling all tense inside. Clint Maury was lounging in an arm chair. His gaze too kept going to Janet.

Sam White said with caution, "You two want me to arbitrate your dispute?"

Maury said, "So far as I'm concerned, there is no dispute. The deal was between Channel and Steve—and it didn't bind the MAB. Steve and I inherited the MAB, and under my father's will I was given a two-thirds' share. It's ten years since John Maury's death, and in that time Steve sold out to me bit by bit. Sometimes I paid him ten thousand, sometimes five. . . . He's a wild one, Steve is. Everytime he wanted to sew some wild oats, he'd demand money of me. I wasn't going to throw it at him for nothing in return. He likes trips to Denver and Dodge and San Antone—so he can gamble and play around with fancy women. Me, I like the MAB."

He paused, shrugged.

"Both of us got what we wanted," he went on. "Steve ran through his share of the ranch. He knows it and he's satisfied. I never heard him complain because I now own the whole of the spread." He gave Jim a mocking look. "When I got back from that horse-buying trip, Steve left for Denver. That was in October. He just got back a week ago. If he's got any of your money left, it's up to you to take it away from him."

Jim looked at Janet, and then at Sam White. He thought that both were eyeing Clint Maury with some doubt.

"I'll see Steve, then," he said.

"Go easy on that, son," Sam White told him. "Like Clint says, Steve is a wild one." He continued to eye Clint Maury. "Clint," he said, "a man has been wronged by your own flesh-and-blood. Steve's an irresponsible cuss. I figure you'd feel bound by his tricky deals, especially when he muddies up the MAB's reputation."

Maury shook his head. "I don't see it that way," he replied. He was thoughtful for a moment, then added, "Since we're discussing the MAB, I may as well bring out one more thing. Steve is not my brother. He wasn't John Maury's son. John Maury married a second time, and the woman was a widow with a son by her first husband. Steve took the Maury

name, and he's kept on using it—and I can't stop that. I'm not my brother's keeper, Sam, because I've got no brother, you see."

"But all these years you've let folks think he was your brother," the old man said bluntly. "Channel here took him for that, and dealt with him in good faith."

"Like I said," Maury replied, "it's been Channel and Steve."

"That's your final word?"

"You know it is, Sam."

There was a lengthy silence, then Janet said, in a tense whisper, "It's not fair, Clint." Her father silenced her with a frown. He looked at Jim. "Jan told me you wanted advice from me?"

"Yes, sir," Jim said.

SAM WHITE lifted his bulk from the rocker, crossed to a gun rack at the far end of the room. He returned with a six-gun in a holster attached to a cartridge-studded belt. He handed the gun rig to Jim.

"When you learn how to use this, go after Steve Maury," he said.

The weapon was a dead-weight in Jim's hand. It was not his way of settling a dispute, but the plains country knew no other way. Here there was no recourse but to the gun. Suddenly Jim knew that if he wanted to survive in this land he must start fighting back—in the way of its people. He knew that Sam White had given him all the advice he could hope for, whether it was good or bad advice. Clint Maury was no longer relaxed; his face was rigid, his eyes narrowed down and murky. Janet looked frightened. She seemed to wish that she could undo what had gone too far. Jim stood up.

"I'll do more than that," he said, talking to Clint Maury. "The first break in the weather, I'm going to hire riders and go on round-up. I'll gather in every animal marked with the JC brand."

"That, friend, will get you real trouble."

"I'll be ready for it," Jim retorted. He nodded to Sam White, said, "Thanks for the advice." He looked at Janet, said, "Good-night."

He left the room, picked up his hat and coat in the hall. Outside he buckled on the gun-rig. The feel of the heavy weapon against his thigh gave him no sat-

isfaction. It did not free him of his sense of inadequacy. He strode to the barn, wondering if old Sam White saw more in him than he himself was aware of.

JIM opened the barn door only wide enough to permit him to bring his horse out. The sorrel gelding stood just inside. It hadn't been unsaddled. Jim paused to tighten the cinch. There was a bit of light; a lantern hanging from a post pushed back the darkness with a dim glow. Jim caught the movement of a shadow, from the corner of his eye, and he knew, even before he turned, that Clint Maury had entered and now stood behind him.

They faced one another, Jim with his back to the sorrel and Maury just inside the door opening. A brown-paper cigarette drooped from Maury's thin lips. Jim watched smoke trickle from the man's nostrils.

"There's one thing more, Channel," Maury said. "The girl."

"What's she got to do with us, Maury?"

"Plenty with me, nothing with you. Get it, mister?"

"No."

"You're thicker through the head than I figured," Maury said. "I'm telling you that you're not seeing her anymore." He reached up, removed the cigarette. His eyes glinted with that jealous rage Jim had seen before. "Maybe it'll take more than words to convince you," he added, and flipped the butt at Jim's eyes.

It hit Jim's cheek, showered red sparks. Maury followed it up, driving in on his toes. He came at a crouch, long arms reaching, but he didn't get Jim in his grip. Jim knew nothing at all about guns, but a fight with bare hands was another matter. Back East he had been a member of an athletic club, and something of an amateur boxer. It was that training that saved him from Clint Maury's vicious rushes—and helped him meet them more than halfway.

He jabbed Maury about the head, reeled him back. Maury cursed with pain and frustration, lunged in again, his purpose always to get his arms about Jim and throw him. Jim side-stepped, landed a blow to the back of the head. Maury fell to his knees, but got his arms around Jim's legs. He heaved Jim over back-

wards, leapt atop him, and they rolled over and over while each strained for the advantage. A bent knee to Jim's stomach did it; he stretched out, limp and breathless. Maury jumped up, started to use his boots. Jim caught hold of his leg, clung to it, upset the man. He leapt up, drove a fist against Maury's nose as he came up. Blood spurted and Maury's head rocked back. The rage was gone from his eyes, was replaced by something akin to alarm. His chest heaved. His breathing rasped. He came in again, more slowly now, and warily.

Jim braced himself, struck out, missed. A blow to the jaw jarred him to the core. He threw up his arms in a feeble defense, and Maury broke through it to pummel him. A red-black mist formed before Jim's eyes, and he thought in sudden panic, *He's got me!* Then his training stood him in good stead. He rolled with Maury's next blow, one to the stomach, then swayed forward in a clinch. He pinioned Maury's arms to his side until his vision cleared, then shoved the man away. He rushed this time, pounding Maury hard about the body. He could see the MAB man weakening. Maury's face was slack, his mouth hanging loose.

Jim aimed what should have been a finishing blow.

Maury rolled away from it, slammed against the wall. He slumped there, his eyes blurry—but still full of hate. He was beaten. He knew he was beaten, and couldn't believe it. Jim muttered, "Come out, Clint. Come out into the open!"

Maury kept tight to the wall a moment longer, wedged against a stack of bagged grain. Then his hand closed, almost without his knowing it, upon a pitch-fork that leaned against the grain. He grabbed up the fork, lunged forward, the sharp tines aimed at Jim's chest. Jim knew that Maury meant to kill him, yet he did not think to grab for the gun at his thigh. He leapt to one side, grabbed up a water pail, and, all with one desperate movement, flung it into the man's face.

Maury lost his hold on the fork, the tines of which jabbed at Jim's coat. Maury fell to his knees, cradled his battered face with his arms. Jim had heard a cry—a woman's horrified cry—when Maury rushed him with the pitch-fork.



Now he saw Janet in the doorway and her father behind her. The girl was trembling with fright rather than shivering from the cold. Sam White's heavy face was scowling. He pushed by Janet, came and looked down at Maury.

"You asked for it, you got it," he muttered. "A hell of a way for a man to misuse a friend's hospitality."

Maury didn't answer. He didn't move from his knees.

Jim said, "Mr. White, I'm sorry for my part in this," and turned to his horse.

It was the day after Christmas, mid-morning, and Jim Channel was cutting firewood with methodical swings of his axe. A rider approached the cabin on Broken Wheel Creek. It was the swarthy, taciturn Spud Larkin who had stopped there before with Curly Bates. The cow-puncher had his bedroll and warsack tied to his cante. He reined in, nodded, pulled off his gloves, and rolled a smoke. Jim rested his axe.

"Got paid off at the Circle-Bar," Spud said, once he'd lighted up. "Heard tell that you were looking for a hand."

Puzzled, Jim asked, "Who told you that, Spud?"

Spud was eying the cuts and bruises on Jim's face. "A couple different parties," he said, drawling it out. "The way they told it, you needed somebody to show you how to use a six-shooter. I'm not bragging, you savvy, but these folks figured that since I've had some experience here and there I'd be the man you'd like to hire."

Jim knew who those folks were: Sam White and his daughter.

He said, "Step down, carry your gear inside."

The way he said it marked him as a tenderfoot no longer.

#### IV

EVERY DAY GUNFIRE racketed around the cabin and lean-to barn that made up the headquarters of the JC Ranch. Most of it was six-gun fire, a heavy blasting of .45 cartridges, but Spud Larkin, a thorough teacher, did not let his pupil neglect the Winchester. As with many Easterners who had hunted game, Jim Channel already was fairly

proficiency with a rifle. But Spud Larkin taught him the fine points. He trained Jim to shoot from the saddle, while his horse was reined in and on the move. "You learn fast," Spud said, in what was high praise.

Jim tried, his earnestness almost grim. He hadn't much time, he realized, not near time enough for him to become as expert as Spud Larkin. But then, Spud was a wizard with firearms. How he had become so expert, the 'puncher never said. But it was evident that at one time in his life a six-gun and a rifle had been the tools of his trade. . . . In the weeks that snow and bitter cold kept them close to the cabin, Spud never spoke of his past. He didn't talk about much of anything.

Saturday afternoons, Spud would saddle up his dun horse and ride out. He'd returned Sunday morning, bringing with him a fresh supply of ammunition—for which Jim would reimburse him. Jim figured that Spud rode no farther than the Circle Bar for the cartridges—and for a poker game with the Circle-Bar hands—but he didn't question the man. Even though he wanted to ask about Janet, Jim expected no information that wasn't volunteered. He was becoming less and less a tenderfoot, and, without realizing it, much like Spud Larkin.

It was the last Saturday in January, a cold afternoon with a bleak sky overhead. Spud was saddling up. Jim opened his trunk, took out his money belt, counted out five ten-dollar gold pieces. He went out to the lean-to, said, "Pay-day, Spud," and handed over the money.

"The Circle-Bar only paid me forty a month."

"You're working for the JC now. It pays fifty a month."

"Well, thanks, boss," Spud said, with a rare smile. He was thoughtful for a minute, then added, "With all that money in my jeans, I'll be riding to Madera Plaza for some fun. You ever been there, Jim?"

Jim said that he hadn't.

"Maybe you'd like to ride along."

"If I ride anywhere, it'll be to the Circle-Bar."

Spud said, "This girl, eh?" then thought some more. "It's up to you, boss," he went on, "but there's plenty to drink and

Mex girls to dance with at Madera Plaza. Riders from all over show up there, Saturday nights."

A short month ago, Jim wouldn't have guessed that he was being told something in a round-about way. But now he knew that Spud was letting him know that MAB riders would be at the Plaza, and that one of them might be Steve Maury. He had been considering a visit to the Circle-Bar, to see Janet, but now he changed his mind.

"Sounds like fun. I'll ride along."

Madera Plaza was a cluster of adobes that had sprung up with the coming of the ranches to the Staked Plains. It was owned by Jose Ramirez, a New Mexican who had been a Comanchero until the trade with the Comanches was broken up. There was a big 'dobe that sheltered Ramirez's trading post and *cantina*, another that was his livery stable. The trader's house was opposite, and on either side was a row of smaller 'dobes where lived the Ramirez relatives and hangers-on. It was beginning to snow, in huge flakes, when Jim Channel and Spud Larkin rode into the village.

They put up their mounts at the livery barn, turning them over to a cheerful Mexican youth. Spud spoke to the boy in Spanish, listened gravely to the reply, then nodded to Jim.

"Half a dozen MAB riders are here," Spud said. "Both Maury's are in the bunch. That's a surprise to me, Clint's being here." He turned back to the boy, and they talked some more. Then Spud said, in English, "Manuel here says that Senor Maury—meaning Clint—shows up every Saturday lately. Drinks a lot. Looks like he's expecting a visitor."

Jim nodded. He knew that Spud meant the visitor Clint Maury was expecting was himself. He gave Spud a questioning look.

"I'll side you," Spud said, reading that unspoken query. "I'll keep the other MAB hands off your back while you talk with Steve."

"Just how tough will Steve be, Spud?"

"Tough enough," Spud replied. "But he's only crooked where money's concerned. He's been in a lot of fights, but I never heard of him trying to shoot a man in the back. Stand up to him, the whole way."

They headed for the *cantina*, and the snow was now a murky white curtain. Spud opened the door, and Jim followed him inside. The place was crowded; Jim guessed that there were at least fifty people gathered there, half a dozen of them young Mexican women. Curly Bates and a couple other Circle-Bar riders sat at a table sharing a bottle. Other men were at other tables, some of them playing cards. The bar was lined, and the painted, gaily dressed girls were dancing with clumsy-footed men at the rear. Music was furnished by two guitars and a fiddle; the musicians sat on a little platform in a corner. It was a noisy, rowdy crowd. A huge pot-bellied stove heated the big room. The air was stale with the mingled smells of tobacco smoke, liquor, humans, and perfume. There was a flurry of excitement. Men nudged each other, called to one another in hoarse whispers, laughed. The crowd had become aware of Jim Channel's presence.

Spud Larkin caught Jim's eye, nodded toward the corner at the rear, opposite that occupied by the musicians. Clint Maury was there alone, at a table, hunched over, staring at the whiskey bottle before him. Jim looked farther about the *cantina*, but saw no signs of Steve Maury. He didn't know whether or not to feel relieved. Spud had heard from the livery stable boy that Steve Maury was in the village.

SPUD led the way to the bar, ordered whiskey of the fat Jose Ramirez. They downed their drinks, and Jim bought the second round. It was less noisy, now. The crowd seemed waiting for something. Voices were lowered, and there was less laughter. The music kept up, though more softly, but one by one the couples stopped dancing. Jim and his companion carried their second drinks to a side table, sat down. Spud rolled a quirly cigarette, and Jim filled his pipe. Four MAB riders, men Jim remembered as part of the crew that had branded his JC mark on the MAB cattle, were at the bar with their heads together.

"Spud, what do you think?" Jim asked.

"Relax. Steve'll show up."

Jim couldn't relax. His nerves knotted up as he waited.



Finally, after perhaps an hour, Clint Maury left his table and came forward. He gave Jim a black look, but went on out without speaking. Jim saw that Spud seemed puzzled by Maury's departure. Jim himself was surprised that the MAB owner, who had appeared somewhat drunk, hadn't picked up their quarrel where it had left off in the Circle-Bar barn. . . . Spud nudged Jim.

A man was descending the stairs at the far end of the bar. He was with a girl, and the two of them were laughing. It was Steve Maury.

THE music broke off in the middle of a chord. Talk ceased. The only sound was the laughter of the pair on the stairs, then Steve had some warning and he too fell silent. His companion laughed alone, and she let her amusement bubble on until Steve muttered, "Shut up, baby."

He'd seen Jim.

The two of them might have been alone, the way their glances met and locked. Jim felt his pulse hammering. He told himself that he was unafraid, yet wasn't sure that was so. He could see Steve's ruddy face darken with a scowl. He thought he detected uneasiness in the man's china blue eyes. Steve came on down, started across the floor, moving with a swagger that was patently bravado. He halted ten feet from Jim's table, his coat pushed back and his thumbs hooked in his gun-belt.

"If it ain't the dude!" he said, lifting his voice, making it hearty. "How's the cattle business, friend?"

"It'd be all right, Steve, but for the thieves in it."

"Meaning just who?"

"You, Steve—providing what I hear is true," Jim said. He shoved back his chair and stood up. "You took my twelve thousand dollars after selling me cattle you didn't own. You had them cold-branded so that my JC mark wouldn't show up after they shed their hair in the spring. You figured I wouldn't know what'd happened to my cattle."

"Maybe you heard wrong, Channel."

"No use denying it. The whole country knows what you pulled."

"You got witnesses that you paid me any money?"

"No. But I've got your signature on a bill of sale."

Steve had been forcing a grin, and it faded. "So you have," he said, without heartiness. "That's something I'd forgot. All right, Channel. I admit taking your money and having the cattle cold-branded. But I don't admit that I didn't have any right to sell MAB stock."

"Clint claims you didn't," Jim retorted.

"Clint lied to you, then," Steve said. "You gather those cattle and rebrand them—and I'll pay the freight of it."

Jim was surprised, and the muttering that arose about the *cantina* proved that others were equally astonished that Steve Maury should back down in such a manner. Jim said, "I aim to do just that, soon as the weather opens up. It'll make trouble between Clint and me. Which is no doubt what you want. You're trying to wiggle out, Steve—and saddle Clint with your swindling job that backfired on you. Hell, Steve, I didn't think you were that yellow!"

The muttering of the crowd was hushed.

Steve Maury winced. He took his gaze off Jim, looked about. His boyish face reddened. Somehow he seemed to lose stature. He looked back at Jim, said thickly, "I'll swallow that, Channel. I won't draw a gun on a damn' tenderfoot—and have your killing on my conscience."

He swung about, walked to the bar, hunched over it.

"Jose," he said, "give me a bottle. I aim to get drunk."

A woman laughed, off-key. It was the girl Steve had been with upstairs. Then the musicians began playing, and Ramirez called out, "*Senores!* A round on the house, please!" The *senores* made slow movement toward the bar. They looked as though it really wasn't possible that Steve Maury was letting this tenderfoot get away with that insult.

Jim turned to Spud Larkin, uncertainty in his eyes.

"Only way to settle it now is to shoot him in cold-blood," Spud said dryly. "And that's no good. Next best thing is to gather your cattle and rebrand—with the help of a tough crew paid fighting wages—and then wait for the Maurys to make the next move."

Jim nodded, said flatly, "Right now, I'm heading back to the ranch." He saw that Spud wanted to stay longer, but was willing to leave. "No need for you to come with me," he added.

He went out, buttoned up his coat and pulled down his hat against the whip of the wind. The snowfall was a heavy one now, and it seemed that a blizzard was in the making. He strode to the livery barn, had the Mex boy saddle his sorrel. He gave the youth a half dollar, then rode out and lifted his horse into a lope. He was close to the *cantina* when the gun barked and window glass shattered.

Jim reigned in, thinking the shot had been fire within the place and that Spud might be in trouble. He saw no one else outside; he seemed alone in the storm. Then the *cantina* door was flung open and Spud Larkin leapt out. Spud saw him there, for Jim was directly in line with the door and its out-thrust of lamplight.

"Get moving, Jim!" Spud yelled. "Ride out—and keep riding!"

"What happened in there, Spud?"

"Didn't you shoot Steve Maury through the window?"

Jim caught the bewilderment in the man's voice. He said, "No, Spud. I—"

He got nothing more out. Other men were rushing from the *cantina*, the four MAB cowpunchers. They had their guns in their hands.

## V

**J**IM KICKED SPURS TO THE sorrel, Spud Larkin whacked it on the rump. The horse swung away, hitting a gallop right off, and only that swift get-away saved Jim Channel from the vengeful MAB riders. That and the blinding snow. When the guns opened up, Jim was an obscure target. Fright left him almost at once, and he slowed his spooked mount. The timbered gully—a creek break thick with cedar that gave the Mexican village its name—loomed through the murky whiteness. Jim swung off the road and took shelter among the brush and trees.

He dismounted and swept away his tracks with a loose branch, then took cover again. A few minutes later, a group of riders swept past. Jim counted ten of them. The four MAB men had been joined

by some of the others who had been in the *cantina*.

They kept to the road, evidently hoping to overtake their quarry upon it—or follow him all the way to Broken Wheel Creek. A minute or two later, another horseman came by at the slower pace. Jim wasn't sure, but he risked it and called, "Spud, that you?"

The rider pulled up. "Jim . . .?"

He put his dune down the slope, came into the thicket, and there was an uneasy look on his lean face. "All hell broke loose," he said sourly. "Did you see anybody when you rode up to the *cantina*?"

"No, Spud. You sure the shot came from outside?"

"Everybody is. It came through a side window."

"I swear I didn't fire it," Jim said. "You can examine my six-gun and rifle, Spud. They haven't been fired." He remembered, then. "What about Clint Maury?" he added. "He left the place before I did, and there's bad blood between him and Steve. He could have been hiding somewhere and seen me come out and go for my horse. If he hates Steve like I think, he could have shot him and figured I'd be blamed."

"It could be," Spud said. "But nobody'll ever believe it."

"Is Steve dead?"

"He was still living when I left."

"Maybe we could go back and find Clint," Jim suggested. But he knew that was no good, even before Spud shook his head. There were still plenty of men at Madera Plaza who'd be anxious to put a rope around a man suspected of back-shooting. "What'll I do?" Jim asked.

"Hide out," Spud told him. "Hole up somewhere. You sure can't go back to the ranch. If Steve dies, the MAB crew will never rest until you're found. If you can keep from being caught, and he doesn't die, they'll give up the search. With Steve alive, it'll be his game—to settle in his own way." He was silent for a lengthy moment, thinking. Then: "There's a Circle-Bar horse camp about twenty miles north of your place. It's not used in mid-winter. We'll head for there."

Luck favored Jim somewhat. The snow lasted only long enough to wipe out his and Spud's tracks, then came only in light



flurries. Had it lasted, grown into a blizzard, the two men would have had difficulty finding their way to the horse camp. They might easily have lost their way entirely—and never reached any shelter. Too often did men lose their lives by being caught on the open plains during a snowstorm. . . . But they reached the camp—a soddy and a feed corral—without trouble. It was a lonely place, and Spud said, "You'll be safe here—as safe as anywhere." He gave Jim a searching look. "You'd be safer still, if you made a run for it—and got out of these parts."

Jim shook his head. "I'm not running farther," he said.

Afterward, when Spud rode away, heading for Broken Wheel Creek to keep an eye on how things turned out, Jim wondered why he didn't want to run—to clear out of this alien county, for once and for all. He knew the answer included many considerations. He was stubborn enough not to admit defeat. He wouldn't return East and confess failure to his family; nor did he want to renege on that fifteen thousand dollar loan made him by his father. Pride made him want to pay off that debt.

Too, he refused to leave the cattle country with people believing that he would shoot a man down in cold-blood. He was sure that Clint Maury was guilty of that shooting, and he clung to a baseless hope that some day he could prove it. . . . Then there was also Janet White. She was the most important reason of all why Jim was determined not to leave the plains country. Ever since Christmas Day, Janet had been in his thoughts. He kept thinking of her being at his cabin. The truth was, Jim Channel had lost his heart to the girl. He sat close to the fire in the soddy and tried not think of what she had said about Clint Maury—that she might marry Clint unless a better man came along.

It began to snow again after midnight.

This time it kept up, and Jim, unable to sleep, knew that it was a good thing for him. There would be no riders man-hunting him in a snowstorm. . . .

SPUD Larkin had said that he would ride back that way within a couple of days. When one day ran into another

and a week dragged by, Jim Channel grew uneasy. He began to fear that something had happened to his *compadre*; he worried that the MAB outfit might have jumped Spud merely because he was employed by the man they hated. Jim believed that this was a case when no news was sure to be bad news.

As for himself, Jim was not too uneasy. He kept close watch and saw no signs of riders. The soddy was well-stocked with provisions by the Circle-Bar; at least enough to keep him fed for a month. . . . But his mind was made up to wait only a day or two longer and then ride out to see if anything had happened to Spud.

The next day—it was his eighth at the camp—a rider showed up. It was Janet, and Spud had sent her. She explained, once inside the soddy and warming herself by the fire, that Spud had kept away the first few days out of fear of being trailed by some of the MAB outfit, then, when the search was called off, he had occupied himself with getting together a round-up crew.

"They're not hunting me any longer?" Jim asked.

"Clint Maury led the search for three days," Janet told him. "Then Steve began to recover. Steve wasn't as badly hurt as everybody believed. He was taken to the Ramirez house and doctored up. He's still there, and he's sure to live."

"But he and all the rest think I shot him."

"Spud says you didn't."

"Did Spud tell you that I think Clint Maury did it?"

Janet nodded, and said gravely, "I think Clint is capable of such a thing. From the first time I met him, something about him frightened me. He . . ." She broke off flushing. "I know," she said. "I said something about maybe I'd marry him unless a better man came along. Well, sometimes a girl will say queer things to a man who shows no interest in her. Especially to a man who must have known more attractive girls back where he came from. I—I would never have married Clint Maury."

Jim sighed with relief.

"Those girls back East," he said. "I forgot them after I got to know you, Jan. Since Christmas Day . . ." He broke

off, sobering. "But there's no good in such talk between us. Until things are settled between Steve and me, I can't plan for the future. And unless I can take possession of my cattle, I'll have no future here in the plains country."

"Maybe if we told Steve the truth," Janet suggested.

"He'd never believe it, even though he and Clint are on the outs," Jim said. "But Steve can't cause any trouble until he's recovered. It's Clint Maury I'm worried about. He won't give up those JC branded cattle without a fight."

"He hates you," Janet said bleakly. "Because of me."

## VI

THAT WINTER ROUND-UP was a killing job. It was hard on men and horses. They made the gather in snow and sleet, in howling wind and bitter cold, and they had to cover hundreds of miles to find cattle bearing the cold-branded JC mark. The great herds were scattered and drifted, driven south toward the wild Pecos country by the storms . . . It took good men, and Spud Larkin had hired that sort. It required many horses in the *remuda*, and Sam White had supplied them. The chuck-wagon and gear wagon also came from the Circle-Bar, on loan. Jeff Long, a burly colored man, was the cook. He kept the crew well fed, and always had a big pot of coffee on the fire.

It was Jim Channel's first round-up, but he rode with the tophands in the crew. Like the others, he stayed in the saddle from dawn until dusk and fought off the cold by drinking quantities of Jeff's steaming coffee. Every day that a few head of JC's were gathered, they were rebranded—and this time the brand was burned into the hide.

It wasn't that every day they made a gather. The cattle were too scattered, too mixed in with the more numerous MAB's, Circle-Bars, and other range stock. And often the weather was so severe the crew couldn't ride far from the round-up camp. The days ran into weeks, and the outfit was moving farther and farther south toward the Pecos badlands. The gather ran now to nearly five hundred head, and

a couple of riders held them in a bunch so that they didn't mix in with the other cattle.

Another day's work added more than thirty head to the herd, and Spud Larkin said, "No use drifting the bunch south with us, Jim. I figure some of us should start trailing these critters toward Broken Wheel Creek."

Jim nodded. He too had been thinking that.

He said, "How many riders will it take?"

"Four will be plenty," Spud told him. "But one of us—you or I—better be along. In case the MAB outfit tries to pull something."

"It's my risk, Spud," Jim said.

The herd was pointed north in the morning. The weather was good. There had been a thaw for several days, and the melting snow was uncovering wide patches of brown grass. Jim and three of the best hands—picked out by Spud Larkin—kept the cattle moving along at an easy pace. Each man was armed with sixgun and rifle. They had two spare horses packed with grub and gear. Jim rode point—and kept a sharp lookout for strange riders.

They kept to the trail until dark, then made camp and paired off to stand night guard on the herd. In the morning, they were in the saddle and on the move before the sun came up. That day too was clear. And warm. It began to look like an early spring . . . But the third day was bleak, with no sun at all. The fourth day there was a drizzle of rain that turned to sleet at nightfall. The herd had traveled about forty miles. It was still that far to Broken Wheel Creek.

The rain and sleet kept up, and Jim and his men lived in clothes that never dried out and slept in damp blankets on the sodden ground. The cattle bawled mournfully, but were easily handled. They finally bedded the cattle down twelve miles from the Broken Wheel, and made their last night camp. Jim told the others, "Tomorrow night we'll bunk in my cabin."

They got the campfire going, protecting it from the rain with a pack tarp rigged above it. They cooked a meal, downed it in a hurry. Shorty Pincher and Pete Larue had the first spell of rid-



ing night. They rode out on tired mounts. Jim and Mike Shane hugged the fire for a smoke before spreading out their bed-rolls. Jim puffed at his pipe and wondered vaguely why the MAB outfit had made no move against his round-up outfit, and just then Mike said, "Rider coming."

Jim peered into the darkness, saw the horseman.

"Watch out for more," he said. "Warn Shorthy and Pete."

He went to his saddle gear, which lay near his picketed horse, and pulled his Winchester from its scabbard. A voice hailed, "Hello, the camp!" Jim recognized it. And muttered, "Steve Maury!"

He moved well away from the glow of the campfire, and called out, "If you're alone, come in, Steve. If you've brought the MAB crew, keep away!"

"I'm alone, Channel," Steve answered.

He came riding in, the rain dripping from his hat brim. He pulled up by the fire, and his face, in its flickering light, was thinned down and colorless. Steve Maury wasn't his old hearty self. He still wasn't wholly recovered from his wound. He folded his gloved hands on the saddle horn, sagged wearily.

"Been waiting for you," he said. "Been holed up in your cabin for more than a week. Looks like you've got your JC cattle."

"About half of them, Steve."

"Your crew still out after the others?"

"That's right. Spud Larkin and the rest are close to the Pecos country," Jim said. He was puzzled by Steve's lack of hostility. "I've got my cattle—or soon will have all of them—and I mean to hold them."

STEVE gave him a wispy grin. "Clint'll have something to say about that, friend," he stated. "He hates your guts, just like he does mine." He paused, but Jim kept silent. Steve went on, "Clint caught on quick that Sam White's daughter fell for you. I reckon he knew before you did. Her visiting your cabin on Christmas Day, while he was at the Circle-Bar, drove him loco with jealousy. He'd like to see you dead, Channel."

"I'll worry about that when he shows up."

"And right now you're worrying about me, eh?"

"I'm not worried," Jim said flatly. "I was ready for you that night at Madera Plaza. That's why I hired on Spud Larkin, to make me ready with a gun. But I didn't back-shoot you through the window."

"I know."

"You know who did it?"

Steve showed another faint smile. "I had an idea it was Clint, soon as I regained consciousness," he said. "Then the White girl showed up at the Plaza, after I'd been laid up for about a week, and convinced me you didn't fire the shot."

Jim thought, *So Janet went to talk with him.* He didn't say anything. He held his rifle at his hip, and watched Steve.

"Clint knows what he wants and he's determined to get it," Steve went on. "The girl is only one of the things he wants. He's out to own the MAB—all to himself. I was only John Maury's adopted son, but the old man willed me an equal share in the MAB. He said it on his death bed, when he was too weak to put it in writing. Clint heard him say it. But after we buried him, Clint said only the old written will stood. It gave me only a third part of the spread, and Clint got that away from me. Everytime I'd cut loose my wolf, he'd cheat me when I was drunk. He'd give me a couple hundred dollars to sign my name to papers that eased me out as a part-owner. When I'd sobered up, he claimed he gave me so many thousand dollars instead of hundreds. I warned him before he left for San Antonio in the fall that he'd have to give me a new deal—or shoot it out with me. Then I pulled that loco swindle on you . . ."

"And Clint saw a way to even things with us both."

"Sure. If he'd killed me, he'd have hanged you."

"Well, we're both still alive."

"Yeah—but for how long?" Steve said. "He'll be after you because you won the girl away from him, and because you've got a thousand head of MAB cattle. He'll be gunning for me because he knows as long as I'm living he won't be able to sleep sound at night."

"What are we going to do about it?"

Jim asked. It was a strange thing; he had expected this meeting to end with blazing guns, but now he looked upon Steve Maury as an ally. "Can't we get the jump on him?"

Steve shook his head. "Not with a big, tough crew siding him," he said flatly. "I just wanted to warn you that Clint'll be after these cattle. I don't know what you can do about it. Me, I'm going into hiding—until the time is ripe for me to go after that no-good son with a gun in his hand!"

He nodded perkily, swung his horse about, and rode off through the rainy darkness.

Jim was peering after him when the first gunshot racketed, loud through the light drumming of rain. Other shots rang out, men yelled. The MAB crew loomed, Clint Maury in the lead. Jim swung his rifle up, began firing at the shadowy figures. He saw a MAB man topple from the saddle, saw another go down with his hit horse. Beside him, Mike Shane was hit in the thigh and fell sprawling.

The MAB riders separated into two bunches, one jumping the herd and the other shooting at its guards. The cattle stampeded, just as the attackers wished, racing wildly from the bed ground with half a dozen riders urging them on with shouts and gunshots. Jim saw Shorty Pincher and Pete Larue hightailing it for safety, but firing back as they fled. Jim kept firing until his Winchester was empty, then he flung it aside and drew his sixgun.

He swung it up, at Clint Maury.

He never fired that shot.

Something struck him from behind, a gun butt crashing down upon his head. His head felt split open and his brain reeled. He dropped to his knees, and only dimly heard Clint Maury say, "Good work, Nate!"

THEY half lifted, half shoved Jim Channel onto his horse. They'd mounted him bareback, but put the bridle on the sorrel. They tied Jim's hands at his back with piggin' strings. He was still dazed by the blow to the head. His hat had been knocked off, and he felt the chill rain on his face and running down his

neck. Most of the MAB crew were gone with the stampeded cattle. Only four men remained with Clint Maury.

"So far as I'm concerned," Clint muttered, "rustling is still a hanging offense. You were caught red-handed, Channel, and I've got the whole MAB crew for witnesses."

"What about this one we shot, boss?" somebody asked.

"Let him go," came the flat reply. "I've got no quarrel with him."

Mike Shane was safe, then, thought Jim with relief. Shorty and Pete had gotten away.

Jim knew that he himself had no chance. He was in Clint Maury's way, and the man had found an excuse for killing him. Hanging a rustler couldn't be called murder. That was in Clint's mind. He didn't want to be blamed for murder. He said, "The nearest trees are at his place on the Broken Wheel. We'll take him there."

It was a long ride, the longest Jim Channel had ever made. Yet he did not want to come to the end of it. His horse was led by one of the MAB riders. Two others flanked him, one to a side, and the fourth brought up the rear. Clint Maury, a hunched figure in the saddle, rode in the lead. No word was spoken during those twelve miles. The rain beat down at them the whole way. Finally they halted close to Jim's cabin, and Clint pointed to a big cottonwood.

"That'll do," he said.

The other four were slow to move, now. There was reluctance in them. Clint shouted at them in sudden rage. "Fools! Don't you know how to string up a damn' rustler?"

He took the rope from his saddle, quickly fashioned a hangman's noose. He gigged his horse close to the big cottonwood and tossed the noose over a stout limb. He tied the rope's other end to the trunk.

"Bring him over here!"

The four kneeled their mounts, swung Jim's sorrel into position. Clint made ready to fit the noose about his victim's neck. It was then that Steve Maury's voice reached out from the cabin window.

"You can't do it, Clint! By damn, that's one thing not even you can do!"



Steve was yelling like a crazy man. "You drop that rope over Channel's head, and I'll gut-shoot you. You back-shooting son! You think I don't know it was you who gunned me down at Madera Plaza!"

Clint cursed, dropped the rope, grabbed for his sixgun.

Steve's rifle blazed.

Clint's horse took the slug, reared high and shrieked wildly. Clint dropped from the saddle before the animal collapsed, firing twice at the cabin window, then darting for the trees. Steve fired again, but missed. Clint kept on running, crashing through the trees and brush. The four MAB hands seemed undecided about taking part in this fight between the Maurys. Steve called two of them by name, "Nate, Charley—turn Channel loose. You known blamed well he's no rustler!"

None of the four moved.

"Turn him loose," Steve bellowed, "or I start shooting again!"

Jim's bonds and the noose were cut away. He caught up the sorrel's reins, then grabbed a rifle from the saddle boot of one of the MAB riders. He swung his horse into the thicket. He saw a figure, moving at a stumbling run, break from the trees and splash across the creek. Clint Maury was fleeing like a man in panic. He reached the far side, scrambled up the bank, plunged on.

Jim put his horse across, but it hit ice on the bank and shod hoofs found no footing. It fell back into the water, throwing Jim against the bank. He was jarred, had the breath knocked out of him, but he forced himself up. Even though dazed he knew that Clint mustn't make good his escape. Jim realized that if they didn't fight it out now, Clint Maury would never call it quits.

He topped the bank, swung his rifle up, fired at Clint. He missed that shot, and another. He began to run, levering another cartridge into the firing chamber. He splashed through muddy pools, stumbled over lingering mounds of snow. His breath rasped. He began to falter. But Clint was losing headway. The man was less accustomed than an Easterner, a tenderfoot, to being afoot. Suddenly he whirled about, and his sixgun blazed.

Jim swung the rifle up, fired without

sighting. He saw Clint stagger, heard the man's grunt.

Clint cursed him, obscenely, and fired again. He fired twice more in wild rage. Jim's rifle cracked again. Clint reeled back, but refused to go down. He rallied, lunged toward Jim, his face convulsed. He came on until within ten feet of the man he hated. Jim held his fire. Jim didn't shoot even when Clint got his sixgun to bear and cocked . . . That was one of the things Spud Larkin had taught him: *Count the other man's shots.* He knew that Clint's gun was empty.

The hammer fell on a fired cartridge.

Clint muttered an oath, tried again. And again. Realization came then. He swung the gun high, flung it at Jim. "Damn you," he mumbled, collapsing.

Clint Maury sprawled flat on his face.

JIM walked back, fording the creek, picking his way through the trees, and the four MAB hands still sat their mounts. Steve Maury came from the cabin, his gun in his hand. He came to meet Jim, an unspoken question in his eyes.

"You're owner of the MAB now, Steve," Jim told him.

"Too bad, in some ways. Clint was a real cattleman," Steve said, sincere regret in his voice. "Too bad there was a rotten streak in him." He was silent a moment. Then: "Those cattle will be returned to you, Channel, and the MAB will pay you damages—for all its cost you to gather them up and rebrand them. You figure we're even?"

"We'll call it that," Jim said.

He saw a saddled mount in the lean-to barn. It was Steve's horse, but he led it out and swung to the saddle.

"One of my men was wounded," he explained. "I'm going out for him." He rode out across the dark range, telling himself that he would bring Mike Shane in and then ride for the Circle-Bar. Janet would want to know that it was over. She would want to know that now he could plan for the future. He would have much to say to her, but Janet would not need to be told that he was in the cattle country to stay. The moment he appeared, she would see that Jim Channel was no longer a tenderfoot.

# THE COLONEL'S COLTS

By M. Howard Lane

Gleaming like polished jewels in their case, one's fingers ached to curl lovingly about their triggers. Yet the dead Colonel's bookish, weakling son swore they would never be fired.

THE DARK-SKINNED RIDER reached Goliad on a lathered horse and started making his inquiries of the first man he met on the late-night street.

"Senor," he said, "I look for Kyle Adams. He ees here, no?"

"Kyle?" the man nodded. "Yeah, you'll find him in the Longhorn settin' in a back-room game with a pair of cattle buyers loaded with Dodge City gold. But I wouldn't disturb him, were I you. Kyle don't like it when folks interrupt his poker—specially when he's winnin'."

"Gracias, senor," the Mexican nodded, "but thees may be the matter of life and death, so I weel take my chances—"

Kyle Adams, and the rest of the silent men at the table listened to the disturbance in the hall, and Kyle recognized a voice he hadn't heard in five years.

"I will see Senor Adams, or slit your gullet!" the Mexican promised.

And George, the barkeep, answered resignedly: "And Kyle will slit yores if you bother him—"

Kyle Adams' hand was already in the discard, and he looked with mute apology in his dark eyes at the other players as he slipped out of his chair. A tall man, flat-bellied, lean-shanked, and broad of shoulder, he turned toward the door, the top of his sleek black head almost on a level with the hanging, green-shaded lamp above the table, and memories came flooding back to him.

Old Angelo's voice, out there in the hall, brought them. Angelo, who had been majordomo for Grandfather Adams' Diamond A horse ranch up in the San Saba country. The one to teach a pair of orphaned brothers how to set a saddle. Only Jeff, three years older than himself, had never seemed to get the hang of riding. To this day, Kyle guessed grimly, his brother probably still looked awkward in

a saddle. And yet, by time honored custom, Jeff had been the man to inherit the Diamond A—and the family guns.

Kyle cracked the door and stepped into the hall, faint amusement in his eyes as he listened to the volley of words, bandying back and forth between the vaquero and barkeep.

"Gents," he drawled, "I'll cut both your throats if you don't quit bellerin'!" His long brown hand moved out gracefully to grasp Angelo's bent fingers. "*Amigo*," he couldn't repress the pleasure in his voice, "it's been a long time. But then I imagine Jeff would look down his long blue nose if you'd ever suggested coming to Goliad or Refugio to see me."

Angelo Dominguez y Noriega's face mapped the passage of three score years and more in its leathery brownness. A hundred wrinkles marred his cheeks as he grinned at Kyle's welcome. Black eyes that still carried the snap of youth, regarded the tall, lean man before him with approval.

"*Por dios!*" he exclaimed, "and the thing I fear has not happened. All thees gambling I hear so much about has not put the fat on your bones. Your body, she ees as hard as when we ride the hills of the San Saba."

"I still do my share of riding, in the day-times," Kyle smiled. "And when I do, I'm aboard *Rey de los Reyes*, but don't ever let Jeff know that."

"The King of Kings!" Angelo breathed. "The finest stallion ever sired on our rancho. But she was sold to a horse trader from San Antonio—"

"Commissioned by me," Kyle said gently, "to buy the best bronc on the Diamond A, at any price. But I still can't see how Jeff ever let loose of that palomino stud. He's no horseman, but even he could see the worth of that beauty."

Angelo's dark face mirrored sudden





*Lead blasted where his shoulders had been.*



contempt. "Senor," he said, "I breeng you something that may answer your question. Eef it does not, then I weel tell you what I can."

His hand reached inside his dusty blue shirt and brought out a square envelope. Kyle took it and moved into the patch of light that came through the open door at the end of the hall, and at the sight of the rounded hand-writing on the envelope he felt even his gambler's heart, that he had schooled to keep a steady pulse in any emergency, quicken its beat.

The letter was from Mary—Mrs. Jeffrey Adams now. Once there had been a time when her name was Mary Breen, and she'd clerked behind the counter in the Ladies Section of her father's General Store in San Saba. That had been eight years ago, Kyle recalled with a sudden sense of inexplicable shock at the quick passage of time. Seventeen then, she'd be twenty-five now, his own age. But a girl of seventeen was a sight older in womanly ways than a boy of the same years.

Kyle had never found the courage to tell Mary Breen how he felt about her, so twenty year old Jeff had been the one to take her to the neighborhood dances, and don a white dickey and string tie on Sundays to squire her to church. Everybody in San Saba, including her father, had figured they'd make a fine match for each other, with Jeffrey due to inherit the fabulous Diamond A. A mighty steady-going young fellow, Jeff Adams. Didn't drink, smoke, or chew—while that young Kyle now—all he wanted to do was gallop over the hills by day, and belly up to San Saba bars by night.

No one, including Mary, had ever guessed Kyle's feelings for her, because he had learned even then to mask his emotions behind an imperturbable smile.

So steady-going Jeff and Mary Breen, the prettiest girl in San Saba, had been married on his twenty-first birthday, and the excitement of the reception Colonel Adams had insisted on giving them at the Diamond A afterwards had been too much for the old man's heart. He'd died that afternoon right at his own festive board, as a gentleman should, with his boots planted solidly beneath his own table.

Stringy old Lawyer Whipple had gathered them together after the funeral

in his musty office above the Mercantile Bank and read the Colonel's Will.

KYLE, and most everybody else had known what its provisions would be, but the Colonel had provided one surprise. Kyle still held Mary's letter in his hand, and he was remembering as vividly as though it had been yesterday the pair of matched Colts Lawyer Whipple had bought from his safe to lay alongside the document. Kyle, who loved good guns, good horses, and good whiskey, had never seen the equal of those shining Peacemakers. Deer-horn grips, polished to an ivory patina, with the carved miniature of a horse's head on each handle had fascinated him even more than the glowing ruby eyes inset in each animal. The weapons were as perfect as custom workmanship could make them, the barrels as smooth as a woman's skin.

"Lord," he had whispered the words without thinking, "I'd give my soul to own those guns!"

Jeff had looked down his long, thin nose. "Watch your tongue, Kyle," he'd snapped. "We'll have no blasphemy here! What's the meaning of those guns, Mr. Whipple? Why show them to us? You know my keen aversion to weapons of any kind."

Jeffrey Adams had taken to reading books he got from some mail-order house in the East, and he liked to show off his knowledge by slinging big words around.

The lawyer had answered the new young owner of the Diamond A with a dry smile. "I believe," he said, "the reading of your late Grandfather's Will and Testament will provide you with the answer."

And it had. Kyle recalled the words as plainly as though the lawyer's dry voice was repeating them to him now.

*Perhaps an old man's love of fine guns will be respected by his heirs, for there have been times in my life when Colts such as these you will be seeing for the first time have saved my life. Not Colts as beautiful perhaps, but just as serviceable. These guns have never been fired, and I hope the necessity to load them will never arise. They are Family Guns,*



*and I charge each and every heir who will bear the name of Adams to hold these Colts in trust, each for the next male kin unto the tenth generation, if the name survives that long.*

*Only if your life be endangered, or in defense of your home, shall these guns be called upon to fulfill their purpose. They are honest guns, and mayhap the time will arise when they will serve the Adamses well . . .*

"Put the damned things in your safe!" Jeff Adams had thundered. "Imagine wasting good money on toys such as these. Why, the Colonel must have been crazy to——"

Kyle had been on his feet by that time, a white-lipped, frozen-faced boy with a pair of clenched fists cocked and ready to swing. "Don't talk to me about blasphemy!" he had cut in on his brother. "I'll beat your damned head off if you ever say another word against the Colonel—or these guns!"

Kyle found himself trembling a little with the memory of that anger still strong in him. Bitter words. Words Jeff Adams had never forgotten, nor forgiven.

LOOKING back now, Kyle could see that his brother had from that day made life miserable for him. And the sight of Mary around the ranch-house had not added to his peace of mind. He spent as much time on the range as a man could, and he rode a good horse to town most every night, and drank all the good whisky he could hold. The blue noses in San Saba called him a wild kid, and prophesied a dire end. And he had, Kyle guessed, been quite a hell-raiser at that. Certainly the town marshal had never forgotten him, nor some of the town toughs and pay-day cowboys who had lost their wages to him.

But it had taken two years for rebellion to reach the blow-up point. Years that had seen Mary Breen grow more lovely, and Jeff Adams more intolerant. Kyle had hung on as long as he could, because he'd felt the ranch and Mary needed him. The girl laughed when they were together, but he'd never seen her laugh in Jeffrey's company.

That last night was a memory now,

tinged with acid pleasure and sharp bitterness. Jeff Adams had driven home from town just in time for supper, and he'd sat down at the head of the table with a self-satisfied smirk on his lips.

"I took those damned guns away from Whipple today," he'd said with obvious relish. "He kicked like a bay steer, said they were his to keep in trust, but I told him they were mine, and I'd have them. Showed the things to Heber Shockley at the bank, and you know that fool offered me a thousand dollars for them. I told him they weren't for sale, and locked them up in one of those new-fangled safe deposit boxes they built into the basement. If they're worth a thousand dollars to Heber now, they may be worth five some day. And when they are, Mary, we'll let him have them and take a trip around the world. We sure as the Devil will never make enough to do it raising horses!"

"You'd never make enough if every hen in the back yard laid golden eggs!" Kyle had snapped, and pushed back from the table. He'd reached for his brother then and yanked him up from his seat, and planted one hard fist squarely on the tip of Jeff's sharp nose. His brother had sprawled backward to the floor, blood gushing across his shirt. "That," Kyle told him, "is a sample of what I'll give you if you ever sell those Colts. Someday they're going to belong to me. Remember that, Jeff. Now I'll be moseying——"

"Step out of this house," Jeff Adams had said through bloody lips, "and never come back. Your precious guns are safe, and I hope if you ever lay hands on them you'll use one bullet to blow your brains out!"

Mary Breen had been a silent shadow waiting beside the barn door when Kyle had led his mount to the yard. Her hands had gripped his arms, and for the only time in his life he'd tasted the sudden sweetness of her lips as she'd reached up and kissed him.

"Kyle," she had whispered, "Kyle, I won't forget you."

Shaken then, and shaken even now, five years later, Kyle remembered he had told her "If you ever need me, Mary, I'll come to you——"

FOR a man with schooled nerves, and a gambler's steady hands, he found his fingers strangely clumsy as he opened the envelope and drew out the single sheet of paper it contained.

The words danced for a minute before his dark eyes; then his vision cleared.

*Kyle, once you promised to come to me. I need you now.*

MARY.

He looked up from the message to find Angelo's eyes studying him questioningly. "I hope," Kyle said, "that you can stand another ride, *amigo*. One drink and we're heading for the Diamond A."

"So that ees what the letter ask, eh?" Angelo said slowly. "*Por dios*, eet is a lot. There are men in San Saba weeth long memories, *Senor*. Thees Mark Rich, the Marshal, he ees not going to like to see you return. Nor ees that banker, Heber Shockley. And the good *Senor* Loder, who was forced to close his gaming tables after you paid him your last visit, he weel bust all the buttons on his vest. They are three *muy malo hombres*, *Senor*, and they run San Saba as though it were their own. They weel breeng you trouble—if they can!"

"I've been in it before," Kyle said briefly, and his eyes passed to the barkeep who was still lingering uncertainly in the hall. "George, go in and tell your dealer to cash my chips. Bring the money to the bar and, if a twenty should stick to your fingers, I'll charge it up to profit and loss. Angelo, come on."

The barkeep grinned. "That's the kind of talk I like to hear——"

Tequila and a pinch of salt satisfied Angelo. Kyle sipped Irish whisky and found the Mexican's eyes going over him.

Angelo grinned a little shame-facedly. "*Senor*," he said, "the boots, those *pantalones* from California, the cut of that coat you wear, they speak of a man with *dinero*. You have done well with the cards, no?"

"Yes," Kyle said simply, "I've got enough in my poke to buy the Diamond A—if Jeff would sell."

"He has the very little reason for wanting to keep the *Rancho*!" Angelo said explosively.

"Diamond A horses are wanted all over the Southwest," Kyle said.

"Eef they are good horses," said the Mexican significantly. "But, *Senor*, tell me how a man can raise fine broncos when the studs run free on the range, and the wild horses she come in from the badlands and steal our mares?"

Kyle forgot his drink. "What in hell is the matter with Jeff?" he demanded.

Angelo answered indirectly, "Wan man," he said, "can do little alone. I am all the help that ees left now. The rest they leave either because there is no *dinero* for pay, or because Jeff speaks to them like no man should be spoken too. Myself, I would have cut the *cabrone's* throat thees many times were it not for the *Senora Maria*. And sometimes I theenk she would be maybeso the happier if I had!"

REY de los Reyes was all that a man could ask in a horse. The big stallion carried Kyle Adams back to the remembered valley of the San Saba while it took three changes for Angelo to keep pace with him.

"It's good," Kyle told his companion simply, "to be coming home," and the thought of Mary was a fire in his blood that time had never quenched.

This was the afternoon of the fourth day since Angelo had left the Diamond A with his message for Kyle, and it was apparent to them as they reached the lower end of San Saba's tree-shaded main street that someone in the community had died since the Mexican's leaving. The cemetery lay a half mile behind them on a knoll bordering the San Saba river, and the funeral procession was wending a solemn way toward them.

"*Dios*," Angelo exclaimed, "thees must be someone of importance. There will be no procession behind poor Angelo's coffin—eef I am lucky enough to even have the coffin!"

A pair of adobes loomed on the left behind the shade trees, and Kyle guided his big palomino between them. "Let this outfit pass," he counseled. "We've got business in town with Whipple before we visit Mary——"

Angelo nodded. He knew the meaning of Kyle's reference to the lawyer for



they'd had time to talk on their ride from Goliad. The majordomo had given him a graphic picture of the condition of the Diamond A—of Jerry Adams' ineptness to manage anything. His passion was books and nothing else. All the dollars that came from the sale of stock went into his library.

"He ees, I theenk, going a little *loco* in the *cabeza*," the Mexican had said significantly.

And Kyle, who had dreamed since boyhood of owning the Diamond A, had told the old majordomo grimly, "If money will buy that ranch, I'll make it mine!" And he had added to himself: "*The guns, too! The Colonel's Colts!*"

"*Carramba!*" The startled expression coming from Angelo's lips brought Kyle's attention to the funeral procession passing along the street. The black hearse was in front of them now, drawn by a team of magnificent Morgans.

"Those, those *caballos*," Angelo pointed a shaking finger at the team, "they belong to our *rancho!*"

The hearse passed on, and behind it came a black-topped buggy, with a driver and one passenger inside. A woman in dark clothes with a set, white face that looked neither right nor left.

Kyle stared at her and his lips framed a name that he didn't utter. The woman in the carriage was Mary Breen Adams!

HE heard Angelo's noisy breathing beside him, saw the old majordomo make the Sign of the Cross, and then his anguished eyes turned mutely to Kyle.

"Wait," Kyle whispered the word. The years he'd spent as a professional gambler had taught him one thing if nothing else. "Wait out your man. Don't try to break him in one hand——" Now, perhaps, that training might come in handy. Mary had sent out a call for him, but Jeff hadn't been dead then. Jeff, though, was in the coffin aboard that hearse. How had he died? Only four days were gone since Angelo had slipped away from the Diamond A, and Jeff had been a well man then.

Kyle watched the buggies and buckboards that followed Mary's carriage. There were townspeople in them. Old families of the neighborhood, all mem-

bers of the same congregation Jeff and Mary had attended.

But there were three men riding in a buckboard at the rear of the procession that brought Kyle Adams to attention in his saddle. One was the President of the Mercantile Bank, Heber Shockley. Five years had added fat to his bland, middle-aged face, and a comfortable paunch bulged his black vest. Driving the rig was Mark Rich, the Town Marshal, tall and gaunt as a starved cougar, and with the same disposition. Cameron Loder, owner of San Saba's Emporium Saloon, covered most of the rear seat. It was said he knew more than any six other men about what went on along the river — both inside and outside the law. Now they held San Saba in the palms of their hands. But why were they bothering to attend Jeffrey Adams' funeral? They'd never been friends of the Adamses before now——

Dust lifted lazy veils into the golden sunlight after the procession passed on its way to the cemetery, and Kyle glanced at Angelo. "There used to be a trail down along the river," he said speculatively, "that could put us into the trees near the Adams family plot. Might make it there without anybody being the wiser, if we moved slow and careful."

"*Si, si*," the Mexican nodded, "but why do we not ride openly to the funeral Senor?"

It was a question that Kyle found hard to answer. He didn't quite find words to express the feelings that were in him. "I can't rightly say, Angelo," he admitted. "But it strikes me there's something wrong with this whole show. Jeff's on his feet when you leave with Mary's note. Now he's dead, four days later. Did Mary have a premonition—or what? And you just saw Rich, and Loder, and Shockley. They make strange mourners!"

The Services were drawing to a close when Kyle and Angelo eased close enough through the trees to come within hearing distance. The Community Minister, Ben Brown, was speaking. His sonorous voice came clearly to them.

". . . cut off in the full flush of a good and Godly life," he was saying unctuously, "But the Lord's ways are mysterious, his miracles to perform. How are we to know

why a man of peace should don Godless weapons, and sally into the hills . . ."

Marshal Mark Rich's voice carried the rough grate of a file crossing rusty metal as he interrupted the ceremony. "Let's have no talk of them guns, parson."

Kyle felt his finger-nails bite against the palms of his hands, and he heard breath whistle audibly from Angelo's lips. Jeff Adams had been wearing the Family Guns when he'd met his death! Why? And why again should Mark Rich object to their mention at Jeff's funeral?

Kyle saw Mary, standing between her father and mother, lift her bowed head momentarily, and he caught a glimpse of her that shocked him. The girl's face was stiff with fright—not grief!

His hand drew the Mexican backward, and silent as they had come, Kyle led the way down to the river and their horses.

"Where now, Senor?" Angelo asked when they were mounted.

Kyle turned a face that had grown hard as flint to the Mexican. "The Diamond A," he said briefly. "We've got to find out how Jeff died—and why—"

"Si," Angelo agreed slowly. "The Senora weel be expecting us—maybeso more than ever now." Then his brow clouded. "But what was thees talk of gons, Senor?"

Kyle had no ready answer. A quick and unexpected death had overtaken his brother. The Parson's talk had told him that much, but neither Brown's words nor the Marshal's intervention could explain the staring fear he had seen on the girl's face.

AFTERNOON was waning when their ride brought them to the Diamond A. Tall hills, studded with granite scarps, flanked the valley. This was horse country. From these hills and valleys the Comanches, those lords of the plains, had recruited most of their mounts. Here was sweet water, green grass, and enough rock to toughen the hooves of Morgan, Arabian, and palomino wearing the Diamond A brand. If a man watched his breeding and rearing, he could raise the finest horses in the world here in the San Saba. Horses in demand over the whole Southwest—that would bring all the wealth a man might ever need. Jeff had had his chance and failed. Now the Diamond A would become Mary's.

"But the guns," Kyle thought with a fierceness that shook him, "will belong to me!"

The Diamond A was a sad travesty of what he remembered. The Colonel had left Jeff a rambling adobe headquarters, walls gleaming with always-fresh white-wash. Barns and corrals and the bunk-house too. White, clean, neat. Now white-wash peeled from walls. Corrals and barns sagged from disuse. Steps leading up to the porch were splintered and worn as Kyle mounted them. The neglect here was something he could almost smell.

"She ees not what you left, Senor Kyle," Angelo murmured at his elbow. "But I could do little, and the Senora could do less. It takes many hands to keep a *rancho* like thees as we remember eet—"

"Yes," Kyle nodded absently, and his eyes were on a door to one side of the main entrance into the vast living room. The door was swinging aimlessly in the breeze that came every afternoon to cool this valley. Once that door had opened into the Colonel's spartan office.

"Senor Jeff made that *officina* into hees library," Angelo explained.

"Why should the door be open?" Kyle asked, and he tramped down the porch to the jarring panel.

One glance inside was enough to answer his question. Jeffrey Adams' library was a shambles. Book-cases were over-turned. His wide desk had been chopped to kindling wood.

"*Madre di Dios!*" Kyle heard Angelo breathe at his elbow. "Thees I do not understand—"

"Neither do I," Kyle answered, and he stepped across scattered books toward another open door that led to the big main room, then stopped so quickly that the Mexican buried his nose in the broad-cloth of Kyle's coat.

Wanton destruction faced them in the Diamond A living room. The great oak table where he had eaten so many times was slashed and scarred with axe-blows. Drapes at the windows were torn from their rods, cut and defiled now. A Spanish oak high-boy, where the Colonel had kept his 'company liquor' was a pile of matchwood.

Shaking his head at the sight, Kyle moved swiftly from room to room, and



the same destruction faced him wherever he looked. "Whoever did this," he told the Mexican, and his dark eyes were smouldering, "sure made a good job of it. I've seen Kansas cyclones that didn't do as much damage!"

"But why, Senor, why?" Angelo's brown face had turned the color of ashes.

Kyle shrugged. "Whoever tore this place up was looking for something," he said slowly. "Mebbe we'll find out what it was when Mary gets here—"

Out in the yard buggy wheels whirled, and Angelo said, "I theenk she comes now, Senor."

Kyle headed down a hall that led to the front of the house, but Angelo made no move to follow the tall gambler for he had seen the sudden wild hunger in Kyle Adams' face, and was not surprised.

The ruin through which he picked his way dulled the edge of Kyle's anticipation as he stepped to the porch, and then on rushing feet Mary was in his arms. She pressed her face against the whiteness of his shirt, and her voice came to him, muffled by the cloth.

"Kyle, Oh Kyle, I knew you'd come to me—"

He was conscious of the warmth and softness of her body, of the faint perfume in her hair, and he steeled himself against the impulse to lift her voice and kiss the lips he had tasted once. But too much lay between them for that. Death, and mystery, and unexplained violence.

Mary Breen Adams seemed to sense his feelings, for he felt her stiffen and draw away from him. Faint pink stained the girl's pale cheeks, and then he saw terror grow again in her gray-blue eyes as she saw the ruin that had once been the living room. With a little cry she sped past him, and Kyle followed her.

"Somebody came through here, hunting something, Mary. What was it?"

"The guns—" Kyle heard her whisper. "The Colonel's Colts. You—your guns now—"

SHE turned, tall and slender, and lovely still, even with the mark of terror on her face, to put her back against the great scarred table, and Kyle saw her fingers grip its edge until the knuckles looked as though they would break through flesh.

Her breasts moved beneath black silk, then her breathing calmed a little. "Kyle, the reason I sent Angelo to find you was because of the guns. Jeff hasn't been himself for a long, long time now, except occasionally when Heber Shockley might come out to pay him a visit, or Mark Rich and that horrible Cameron Loder."

"Strange friends, he's made," Kyle commented half under his breath.

The girl went on. "Five days ago, Jeff came from town just about supper time, and brought a bundle into the house. He unwrapped it on the table and his eyes looked almost like a wild man's. Kyle, he'd brought home the Colonel's Colts! He picked them up and fondled them, and then started to curse them. And then he said, almost in a whisper, 'Gold. You're worth your weight in gold. I'll break the spell you've put on us, and have gold to burn—'"

Kyle shook his head, but he said nothing, listening intently as the girl continued speaking. "Jeff took the Colts and locked them in a drawer of his library desk, and I—I called Angelo in and gave him the note to you. I was afraid he was planning to destroy the guns or sell them, and they weren't really his to sell. The next day I was glad I'd finally called you home."

"Why?" Kyle asked.

"Jeff left the house, dressed for riding, and you know how he hated a saddle. He brought a horse from the barn. He was wearing the Family Guns, Kyle! When he rode away, I followed him. Kyle, I didn't know where he was going, or what he was planning to do. He'd never put on a pair of guns before. He rode toward Mustang Mesa. It was growing dark and that trail isn't good. But he made it to the top. I stayed as close as I could, but he reached that bunch of oaks at Lost Spring ahead of me. I lost sight of him in the trees—and—and then only his horse came out. I spurred toward the grove, and when I got almost to it I heard a shot—"

"A shot?" Kyle interjected.

Mary nodded. "The bullet came so close I could almost feel it. Somebody was shooting at me, but I—I kept right on riding, and then another horse raced from the trees with a man hunched over in his saddle. It was so dark I couldn't recog-

nize him, but Kyle, somebody had been waiting there for Jeff. When I found him he was dead. It—it looked like he ran into a low limb."

"Or a club across the back of the neck," Kyle said grimly. "It's cheaper to kill a man, Mary, than hand over a thousand—or five thousand dollars for a pair of Colts!"

"But I got the guns!" the girl exclaimed. "I brought them home and hid them in the one place where I think they're safe."

"And after you took Jeff's body into San Saba, you stayed there with your folks?" Kyle asked.

"Yes," Mary nodded.

"So this could have happened any day since Jeff died," Kyle murmured thoughtfully. "Let's go see if you did a good job of hiding the guns—"

Mary led the way from the living room down a remembered hall, past the bedroom where Jeffrey Adams had brought a young bride, and Kyle watched her pause before what had been a guest room. She gave him a brief little smile.

"This is my room now, Kyle," she explained quietly. "Jeff and I quit being man and wife a long, long time ago . . . the Colonel's Colts," she added, "are in a chest under some of my clothes. It was the safest place I could think of to put them."

She pushed the door open, and Kyle heard her cry out sharply. Across her shoulder he saw feminine underthings scattered ruthlessly in front of an overturned Chinese chest.

"The guns *were* here," he said gently.

Mary stepped back and Kyle's arms went around her. Her shoulders were shaking, and he knew she was close to hysteria. He tried to focus her attention by asking another question.

"Mary, did you report your suspicion concerning Jeff's death to Mark Rich?"

"Yes," the girl steadied herself and turned toward him once more. "Yes, I told him, and he—he looked Jeff over and said his death sure looked accidental to him. He—he acted like he was just trying to humor me—"

"Maybe," Kyle drawled, and there was iron in his voice now, "he'll try and humor me, too!"

DUSK was shaping into darkness when Kyle and Angelo drove Mary Adams into San Saba. Silent now; there'd been time for them to do their talking on the way in from the Diamond A.

Kyle had summed up the situation succinctly. "There's three men in this town who might want our Family Guns: Shockley, Cameron Loder, and Mark Rich. They've all visited Jeff from time to time, and mebbe that's what they came to talk about, but, even if he hated the Colonel's Colts, it's taken all this time to try and persuade him to part with them."

"But Senor, eef he jes' want for to sell those gons, why not do eet above the boards right here in town?" Angelo had expostulated.

"Because," Kyle said bleakly, "he was afraid to handle it that way. If he parted with those Colts out on the range he could claim he was held up, and the guns stolen from him. He could say he lost them. Hell, he could use a dozen excuses. And you can lay your last dollar that the hombre who got them wanted it played that way. It's easier to kill a man than pay him!"

Kyle left the girl at the home of her parents, and she put her hands in his for one electric minute. "Luck," she whispered. "Good luck, Kyle—"

In the buckboard, he and Angelo cut across town to the main street. Lights were glowing in stores, and behind the batwings of saloons up and down the way. A block ahead Cameron Loder's Emporium was the most impressive structure next to the two-story brick of the Mercantile Bank building. A half block beyond was Mark Rich's jail office.

Kyle swung the buckboard to a halt in front of the marshal's office, and shrugged the wrinkles from his gray coat. The cloth masked a shoulder holster and short-barreled Colt. He stepped through the open door of the office, A hanging lamp cast a pool of brightness over the lawman's desk.

Mark Rich looked up from some circulars he'd been studying, and Kyle smiled inwardly at the look of surprise that crossed the man's narrow, coyote-like face.

"A—Adams," he stuttered. "What in hell you doin' in San Saba?"

"I'm here to investigate a little matter



of stolen guns," Kyle drawled. "And maybe murder—" His eyes were close on the marshal's face, and he saw the lawman's wide lips go slack.

"I'm wonderin'," he struck again, "just why you shut up Ben Brown this afternoon when he mentioned our Family Guns. Did you, maybe, know then that they'd been stolen?"

"And how the hell should I know anything like that?" Mark Rich blustered. "I jest didn't think it was fitten and proper to talk about guns at a funeral—"

Kyle chuckled without mirth. "Sure funny," he drawled, "the sentiments a funeral bring out in a man—" He rose easily from his chair. "One more thing, marshal. I took a quick ride out to Lost Spring this afternoon, and I found some evidence there that may hang a man—"

"If you got anything to prove that Jeff didn't bang his head accidental and break his neck when he fell off'n his bronc, it's yore duty to hand it over to me!" Mark Rich thundered.

"I've been doing my own fighting too long to stop now, Rich!" Kyle told him briefly, and he could hear the marshal mouthing curses behind him when he stepped outside.

Angelo fell in beside him. "I leesten through the window," he said as Kyle tramped toward Cameron Loder's Emporium on the corner. "Why for you lie to Senor Reech? We do not go to the mesa yet—"

"But Mark doesn't know that," Kyle murmured. "Now, while I'm in the Emporium you mosey on down to the livery and get the two best broncs in the place. Wait there until I show up—"

"*Por dios!* So you feex eet so Angelo mees the fun, no?"

Kyle gave the Mexican a bleak glance. "You may run into plenty of fun before morning," he said grimly. "I want the horses so we can slip out of town while our buckboard's still here in plain sight. It'll make anybody who might be interested figure we're somewhere around town."

"And where do we go, Senor?"

"Mustang Mesa," said Kyle, and he turned in through the door of the garishly bright Emporium.

Loder was at his customary place at the inner end of the long bar. There were

men about the room who recognized the tall gambler, and some of them had a smile for him and a wave of their hand—others turned away, scowling. Kyle edged along the bar toward Loder, and he saw the saloon-man's golden teeth show in a bland smile.

"Adams," he boomed, when Kyle neared him, "by the Lord, it's good to see you again. Goin' to break my games this time?"

"If I need the money to rebuild the Diamond A, yes," Kyle told him bluntly.

"Too bad about your brother bustin' himself up," Loder commented. "Hear tell he was wearing them famous guns of the Cunnel's when it happened—"

KYLE studied the saloonman as he would an experienced adversary across a poker table.

"The guns," he told Loder deliberately, "have been stolen."

"Why, now, you don't say!" Loder's surprise seemed genuine, but his hooded eyes never changed expression. "You folks are sure runnin' into a streak of bad luck."

"Not as bad," Kyle answered, "as some other gent is going to head into. The hombre who stole those Colts is going to end up with a hangnoose around his neck."

"Now, Adams," the saloonman's teeth glittered, "you cain't hang a man for stealin' a pair of guns. You know that—"

"No," Kyle agreed, and he let the silence grow between them for a significant moment, then added gently, "But they hang men for murder in Texas. And my brother was murdered! I took a little ride out to Lost Spring this afternoon, and the killer hadn't done a very good job of coverin' his tracks."

He had planted another seed of doubt and, before Loder could reply, Kyle moved out to the street, and swung left to the corner. A pair of blocks away to the right lay the high, white mansion that belonged to Heber Shockley.

Kyle moved toward it, and stepped to the porch. An elderly man-servant answered his knock. Mr. Shockley, he informed Kyle, was not at home. He had left on horseback earlier in the evening. No, the servant did not know when Mr. Shockley would return.

Nodding his thanks, Kyle turned back to the dark walk and headed beneath the trees toward the lights of Main Street that he could see in the distance. Where had Shockley gone? The banker was not the kind to make night rides—

And then that sixth sense possessed by all men who pit their wits against their fellow men, brought a warning that he was not alone here in the darkness. He heard a rustle of sound at the bole of a tree behind him, and side-stepped, crouching and turning all in one movement. Lead blasted where his shoulders had been and Kyle saw the blossom of gun-flame that played about the trunk of the tree. His own Colt was out of its shoulder clip and in his hand, but he held his fire as boots raced off through the darkness.

He listened until the sound disappeared and then turned again to move toward the lights of Main Street, a faint, icy smile on his lips. Time was running short.

Angelo was at the Livery, worry marking his dark face. "*Por dios*," he complained, "thees waiting ees the hardest theeng I do yet—"

"The waiting is all over," Kyle told him as they eased out of the rear of the Livery and rode back alleys out of San Saba. "We'll have Jeff's killer, and likely the Colonel's Colts before morning—either that or a one way ticket to hell!"

As they rode through the night, he told the Mexican briefly of the results of his interviews and of Shockley's disappearance, and the attempt made on his life.

"One of those three hombres," he summed up, "is guilty, and I'm damned if I can figure which it is. But I'm guessing we'll know before we spend much time on Mustang Mesa. Whoever turned this trick is going to hightail it out there pronto to try and erase the evidence I claim to have found."

"And we weel be there to greet heem—"

"Yes," Kyle drew a deep breath. "We'll be there. . . ."

**T**EXAS STARS wheeled across the velvet-black sky as they angled across a Diamond A range. Hills grew about them, and the square bulk of Mustang Mesa loomed blacker than the night as they reached its base.

Angelo took the lead, seeking out the

precipitous trail Jeff Adams had travelled to the mesa-top. It was slow going, the hooves of their mounts striking sparks from hidden rocks. As they reached the gently sloping plateau, Angelo swung in his saddle to glance at Kyle. "Those trees to the left, Senor," he said softly. "Lost Spring comes from boulders there. Eet ees where that killer waited for Senor Jeff—"

Kyle halted the Mexican's words with a sharp gesture. "Somebody," he said softly, "has gotten the edge on us. I just caught the shine of starlight on bridle steel! Swing in here," and he moved to one side behind boulders to ground-rein his mount.

Silently, bent almost double, they started toward the circle of oaks about the spring, and then Kyle flung himself flat in the short grass. Angelo dropped beside him, for his ears, too, had picked up the drum-beat of hooves on the sounding board of the trail behind them.

"*Dios*," he whispered, "thees mesa she ees popular tonight!"

A rider, unrecognizable in the gloom, swept past so close that gravel kicked up by his mount pelted against them. Kyle wiped dust from his eyes, and watched the man disappear beneath the trees.

Then a sound came from the yonder darkness that froze him with surprise and shock. A woman's scream, sharp in the night!

Angelo cursed. Kyle hit his feet in a sprinting run that left the Mexican behind. Mary was there ahead in the grove. That cry could have come from no one else. What was she doing out here? Kyle didn't know, and then he heard a voice that was hard for him to recognize as the once-suave tones of Heber Shockley.

"You dirty double-crosser," his voice was coming from the boughs of one of the giant oaks as Kyle slowed his pace, "I don't see the guns you were supposed to bring out here with you tonight. Damn you, I had a hunch you wouldn't bring them—"

"You're a sniveling coward!" the marshal's voice was contemptuous. "When a gent hires me to pull his chestnuts out of the fire he pays for it. And what in the name of damnation hell are you doing holding that woman up there with you?"



"I'll keep her until you produce the guns!" Heber Shockley's voice was a madman's snarl. "And, if you don't, I'll put a bullet through her head!"

Kyle was inching slowly closer, and he could feel Angelo at his heels. Ice caked his spine. Shockley's vindictiveness could make him kill Mary in a second's vengeful rage if the slightest alien sound disturbed the uneasy balance of conflicting forces there beneath the oaks.

Mark Rich's voice lost some of its arrogance. "Heber," he said, "damn it, I told you I got to the Diamond A too late. Somebody beat me to it, and got those guns. And now that cussed brother of Jeff Adams claims he's got evidence that Jeff was murdered. We've got to figure out a way to take care of him and quit worrying about the damned guns. I tackled him once tonight, but missed my play."

"To hell with Kyle Adams!" the banker screamed. "I tell you I want those guns! I've wanted them ever since I first laid eyes on them, and you made the deal to get them for me. You said you could save me money, and make a nice piece for yourself. Damn you. I know—"

"I'm afraid you're both wrong," a cold voice drawled from the edge of the boulders that masked the spring. "I have the Colonel's Colts, and as collector's items I know men in New York who will pay said fortune for them. But you can have them cheap, Shockley, and my silence as well, for say ten thousand dollars!"

Kyle was close enough now to make out the bulky shape of the saloon-man, then his attention was caught by a flurry of movement on the limb of one of the big oaks that arched above the clearing. Shockley cursed with sudden pain as Mary Breen's fingernails clawed suddenly down across his face, and he saw the dim shape of the girl drop down from the tree.

Shockley cried, "Stop her!"

Mark Rich was swinging in his saddle and his hand was rising with a Colt in it. "Loder, you're the man I want. That ten thousand will look good in my poke—"

A stub-barreled Sunday-gun flamed in the saloonman's hand as the marshal's Colt echoed his words. Kyle saw the lawman reel in his saddle, and his Colt started to sag as Loder fired a second time.

A wild burst of shots spewed from the tree, and Kyle saw Mary stumble and fall. Heber Shockley was shooting at the girl! Kyle fired from the ground. He reached his feet, and drove another and a third shot toward the banker, and he heard the man's wild scream of terror as the force of lead smashed him from his precarious seat on the tree-limb. Like some giant black-winged bird of prey he came sprawling down to land almost beside Mary Breen.

KYLE leaped toward the girl, and he heard Angelo's shout of pure pleasure. "Senor," the Mexican called from near the spring, "thees broom she has sweep clean! Loder he ees dead with the bullet in the belly. Mark Reech maybe weel live long enough to hang—"

Kyle paid no attention to the Mexican. He was bending over Mary, feeling her body for sign of wounds, and then she stirred beneath his hands.

"Oh, Kyle," she whispered, "Kyle, I'm all right. There's no fool like a woman, I guess, and none bigger than me. A boy brought a note after you left me tonight, and it told me to come out here alone. Said if I would find your guns—our guns—here at the Spring. But instead I found Heber Shockley."

"The undertaker will be the next one to find him!" Kyle told the girl. "It looks like the Colonel's guns have helped clean up the San Saba without ever firing a shot!"

Angelo came running over to them from the direction of the spring, and he carried a black gunbelt in his hands. Starlight glowed softly on the ivory patina of polished gun-stocks.

He pressed the Peacemakers into Kyle's hands. "The Colonel's Colts," he said proudly. "I find heem in the bags behind Senor Loder's saddle."

Kyle took the weapons and held them for a moment silently. With fingers that trembled slightly, he swung the gun-belt about his waist and notched it in place.

"From now on," he said, "I'll be wearing these."

"For as long as we live—" Mary Breen whispered. "For as long as there are Adamses to call the Diamond A their own."

# Last Stand Of A Law Dog

*By Walker A. Tompkins*

DEATH WAS COMING UP THE Chisholm Trail with Giff Cragg, the marshal of Longhorn, marked as its victim. Ever since the gun battle in Joe Flance's saloon a year ago, old Giff had been expecting Death's messenger, in one guise or another. It was ironic that that courier of doom should arrive on this of all mornings, when Longhorn's city council was meeting in secret session to oust the old star-toter from the office he had held for twenty-odd turbulent years.

Giff Cragg, off duty, was sunning his rheumatic frame on the front porch of the jailhouse when the stranger loped up Postoak Street on a blue roan gelding which bore the Rocking V iron on its hind quarters, and reined in at the jail rack.

The rider was young and sun-blackened and his batwing chaps bore the scuffed marks which hinted that he came from the *brasada* thicket country down on the Nueces. Reading the roan's brand, Cragg guessed vaguely that he was repping for the big Rocking V outfit, which was always among the first spreads to reach Longhorn with a pool herd, Kansas bound; a rider sent in advance of Rocking V beef, probably, to scout grass conditions and the depth of the Red River crossing here between Texas and the Indian Nations.

It was with some surprise that the grizzled old marshal heard the stranger call out his name as he stepped from stirrups.

"You Marshal Cragg, suh?"

Getting the lawman's nod, the rider fished a grimy envelope out of his shirt pocket.

"I been riding the grubline north," the stranger explained. "A rancher down-trail gave me this message to deliver when he heard I would reach Longhorn ahead of him."

Cragg accepted the envelope and muttered his thanks. This letter, he knew instinctively, was the one he had been expecting for almost a year now.

The Rocking V man inquired the way to Joe Flance's place, the Blue Palace Saloon. He left his blue roan at the jail rack and headed down Postoak toward the saloon, leaving Cragg to slit open the envelope.

The letter was crudely penciled, giving no clue as to its author, each word painfully fashioned in capital letters:

MARSHAL CRAGG,  
LONGHORN, TEXAS.

LAST SUMMER YOU LOCKED UP FLANCE'S SALOON AFTER SHOOTING THE SLASH W TRAIL BOSS, JUTT LEEDOM, AND JAILING FOUR-FIVE OF HIS DROVERS. THAT BUSINESS DELAYED SLASH W TEN DAYS AND WHEN THE HERD REACHED DODGE CITY THE BOTTOM HAD DROPPED OUT OF THE BEEF MARKET. AN OUTFIT DON'T FORGIVE A THING LIKE THAT VERY EASY.

SLASH W IS ON THE TRAIL AGAIN. WE FORD THE RED AT LONGHORN SOON AFTER YOU GET THIS LETTER. WHEN SLASH W SEES JUTT LEEDOM'S GRAVE IN YOUR BOOT-HILL, THEY'RE BOUND TO REMEMBER IT WAS YOU WHO PUT HIM SIX FOOT UNDER, MARSHAL.

GIVE SLASH W PLENTY OF ELBOW ROOM WHEN THEY SHOW UP. YOU ORDERED SLASH W TO DRIFT ON THROUGH LONGHORN WITHOUT STOPPING THIS SEASON. SLASH W AIMS TO GIVE YOU A CHANCE TO BACK UP THAT WAR TALK, CRAGG. BETTER YOU LEAVE TOWN.

The letter was unsigned. But Giff Cragg had no need to ask the Rocking V puncher who had delivered it as to the identity of its writer.

Moss Wetrip was en route north with vengeance in his blood, a feud to settle in gunsmoke. The grapevine had already warned Cragg that the Slash W boss had marked him for a spot in the same boot-hill where Jutt Leedom was buried. The wonder was that Wetrip hadn't showed up before now, on a bushwhack mission . . .

Crumpling the letter in an arthritic fist, Giff Cragg let his rheumy gaze drift across Postoak to the upper story of the Panhandle Saddle Shop, where he knew his own destiny was in the balance. That upstairs room served Longhorn as a sort of city hall, and the City Dads were up



Old Giff Cragg didn't mind age crippling his magic gun, but he sure aimed to turn in a clean badge—bright enough to show a killer's face by gun-flame.

*Whooping and shooting the sky, the Texans thundered into town.*



there holding a pow-wow to which Cragg hadn't been invited.

All winter the ugly rumor had been gaining momentum, that Giff Cragg, at seventy-five, had outlived his usefulness as marshal of Longhorn. In barrooms and over gambling tables, the arguments had seesawed pro and con.

His friends insisted that old Giff's twenty-year record would keep forever bright the star he wore, that his fighting heart was as sound as ever. His enemies—and their number was legion, for Longhorn had the makings of the toughest town on the Chisholm Trail—had a ready answer for that.

Weren't Cragg's eyes playing out on him? Hadn't old age dulled his reflexes, robbing his legendary draw of its one-time speed? Wasn't arthritis crippling his trigger fingers? It took more than guts and brains and a spectacular past to hold a hell-bent trail town in line. Cragg had outlived his time . . .

Cragg had heard those rumors, but he had ignored them. Cruising Post oak Street from noon to midnight, he kept the riff-raff from molesting the respectable citizenry, playing no favorites, wearing no man's collar, siding with no clique or faction in the town. He knew his job and kept his reins taut, and to hell with rumors . . .

But this morning, cooking breakfast in his living quarters in the jail annex, he had seen Mayor Joe Flance and the three members of the town council meet at the alley door which led to the council chambers over the saddle shop. He knew then that events were fast shaping up against him, materializing into something more concrete than mere rumor. Joe Flance was crowding the City Dads into action, giving substance to the slurring innuendos which were being whispered behind hands in the honkies and dead-falls.

**T**HIS was the first meeting Giff Cragg had missed since the trail town had incorporated under the laws of Texas, ten years before. Old Giff was sure Flance had called a secret session of the council when Lucy Paige had shown up, toting the ledger she used for recording the minutes.

Trouble came in bunches. This ultimatum which had come up the Trail from Moss Wetrip—boiled down to its essentials, it was a warning to pull stakes or die. What hurt was the likelihood that Joe Flance would force him to turn in his star before Wetrip's outfit got to the Red. That was what put a sickish sensation in Giff Cragg's belly this morning, not the fact that his career was in jeodardy. After twenty years the old warhorse was being put out to pasture, leaving someone else to fight his battles . . .

Because inaction and suspense could be intolerable things, the old lawman shuffled around back to the shed he had built against the rear wall of the brick jail, where he was building a steam-heat rig that was at once his hobby and his cherished pride.

It got plenty cold in wintertime, when the Texas northers crusted the Red with ice and stacked snowdrifts against Longhorn's shabby buildings. But Giff Cragg had freighted in an old boiler from a wrecked ferryboat down-river, had installed it beside a brick furnace in his jail lean-to. Before cold weather rolled around again he would have the cell block, front office and his private living quarters equipped with steam pipes heated by the boiler.

Threading pipe on the makeshift workbench in the furnace room, Giff Cragg let his mind wander a bit to his personal dilemma. Everything added up against him.

Joe Flance, the present mayor and leading politician, was one of those original carpetbaggers who had bought up holdings in town with the profits of his Union army contracts, buying out stores and saloons and vacant lots from their bankrupt owners. But so far, Joe Flance hadn't been able to oust Longhorn's Texas marshal . . .

Just short of eleven o'clock, suspense got the best of Cragg and he left his pipe-threading chore to return to his front office. He was in time to see the town clerk, Lucy Paige, opening the windows of the council chambers to air them out. Simultaneously he saw Joe Flance and the City Dads slip out of the alley entrance with an obscure conspiratorial air and scatter to their respective places of



business, their conference over.

"Left Lucy to break the news," Cragg muttered. "And I'd welcome it, if it wasn't for this Slash W business crowding me . . ."

He saw Lucy Paige leave the saddle shop's alley door and quarter through the ankle-deep dust of Postoak Street, coming toward the jail. She was slim and curvesome in her neat gingham dress, the sun catching highlights on her highpiled mass of wheat-colored hair.

Giff Cragg pretended to be engrossed in dismantling his Ballard .57 carbine when Lucy presented herself in the jail doorway. She had the bulky minute-book tucked under her arm, and her usual jaunty greeting and reckless grin were missing this morning.

"Marshal, I—"

"You are the bearer of evil tidings," Cragg cut in. "Come in, honey, and haul up a chair. I been expectin' you."

Lucy Paige remained standing, her soft amber eyes filled with something which struck Cragg as being akin to pity. He didn't want pity from this brawling cowtown he had ramrodded for the best years of his life, come hell or high water. Anything but pity . . .

"Pop—" That was more like it. That was the way Lucy Paige had always addressed him, since her pigtail days. "Pop, the Mayor called a special meeting of the Council this morning. He—he purposely didn't notify you."

Cragg nodded, a gnarled hand seeking the crusty meerschaum in his vest pocket. He started cramming the bowl with shavings from a cut plug which he kept in an old gunpowder can on his desk.

"Pop—they've hired a new marshal," she gave it to him bluntly. "He'll be here next week-end to take over. They—they instructed me to ask you for your resignation, effective when the new marshal shows up. I—I'm sorry, Pop."

If old Cragg was hurt by the news, he gave no sign of it. He was thinking, "Maybe I'll have time to clip Moss Wetrip's horns before I'm kicked out, at that . . ."

Aloud he said to the girl, "Well, now, Lucy—no reason for you to pull such a long face. Longhorn needs a new star-

toter, me being stove up like I am. You'll have my resignation."

"Joe Flance has been after my star since before you was born, Lucy," he reassured her. "The other councilmen have sided me a long time, wanting to keep Longhorn a respectable community. Flance aims to hire a gunhawk, a killer who'll follow orders and open Longhorn to the hoodlum trade . . . to the profit of Flance's deadfalls and honkatons. He's finally pulled the council his way by convincin' 'em I'm too old to pack a gun or tote a star."

It was a long speech for the tactiturn marshal, but it summed up exactly what had happened at this morning's council meeting. Flance had swung the other board members against Cragg at last.

Knowing what the star meant to old Giff, the girl lost the last vestige of her control and left the doorway to bury her cheek against his rusty vest, as she had once done in her baby days.

"It—it's not fair, Pop," she choked. "You could whip Longhorn into line, and you know it. The council could at least have let you retire with dignity."

Giff Cragg held the girl away from him. There was something he had to know: "Any idea who the new marshal will be, Lucy?"

She nodded, suddenly unable to meet his eyes, but in that confusion Giff Cragg knew he had out-foxed Joe Flance.

"It's Duane Redfern, Pop. The man I'm engaged to marry."

## II

STRANGE LIGHTS KINDLED IN the old man's eyes, and she felt the sudden accelerated pumping of his heart as she clung to him. Duane Redfern was a well-known name in north Texas. Barely out of his teens, he had cleaned up San Antone, later moving to Tascosa where his blazing guns had tamed that lawless trail town.

"I didn't know this, Pop," she went on, "but Duane applied for the job a month ago. The council hired him without my knowledge. Today's meeting was so Joe Flance could draw up a resolution demanding your resignation. You—you don't think I had anything to do—"

For the first time, the old marshal showed her a grin.

"Lucy," he said, chucking her under the chin with paternal familiarity, "I'll let you in on a secret. Ever since you went down to San Antone to school an' met young Redfern an' fell in love with him, I been doing some thinking."

She stared at the old man, not sure she understood him.

"Pop, do you mean——"

"It was me that sent word to Duane Redfern that Longhorn needed a new marshal, honey. He was the logical man for the job. Only I—I didn't think he'd take up my offer so pronto. I'd had hopes of ramrodding Longhorn for this summer, anyway."

She kissed him then, impulsively and with all her girlish adoration in her eyes. And, because she was needed at her father's Trail House hotel and restaurant, she left the jail office before Giff Cragg could summon the courage to let her in on a secret which she must some day know.

Left alone, Cragg did something which was a rare thing for him.

**P**ULLING the old-fashioned turnip watch out of his pocket—a time-piece which had been a wedding gift from his bride—Cragg screwed off the back of the silver case and scanned the time-tarnished daguerrotype he had soldered there, long ago, as a sort of lucky talisman.

It portrayed a likeness of himself, as he had appeared on his first wedding anniversary thirty years ago. Seated stiffly on a photographer's stool, a girl's hand was on his shoulder. A fragile beauty who must have been around Lucy Paige's age when the tintype was taken. In Giff Cragg's arms was a doll-like baby in a long garment of filmy white lace.

Patrice Redfern had been her maiden name. Giff had long since stopped trying to rationalize the right or wrong of what had separated them. Patrice hadn't possessed the moral or physical stamina to cope with the rigorous life which had been the Texas frontier in the years between the Alamo and Fort Sumter.

The romantic buffalo hunter must have looked glamorous to a sensitive young

wife and mother who was eating her heart out in an isolated settlement here on the Red, living under the constant threat of Comanche attack. Giff Cragg hadn't laid eyes on her or the baby since the buckskin man had taken them away while Giff was out hunting antelope for their winter meat supply.

He knew in a vague way that she had returned to San Antonio to live, to raise little Duane to be a gentleman instead of a frontiersman . . .

Cragg screwed the watch case shut and snapped open the front cover to consult the time. Eleven forty-five. Fifteen minutes before his inefficient deputy, Slat McBride, wound up his midnight-to-noon tour of duty and came into the jail office to hang up his gunbelt for another day.

Come twelve noon, Cragg's official day would begin, winding up at midnight. Experience had taught the old lawman that trouble usually broke during the hours between sundown and midnight. That was why he had delegated the quiet second shift to his deputy.

Duane Redfern was due in another two-three days, Lucy had told him. When he arrived, Giff Cragg would have reached trail's end, so far as his life's work was concerned. The knowledge put an empty feeling in the pit of his belly.

Slat McBride came in on the dot of twelve, grunted his usual laconic report of his tour's eventless routine, hung up his guns and departed. Cragg could tell that McBride hadn't heard about what had happened at the secret council meeting.

Buckling on his own gun harness, Cragg left the Longhorn jail and headed upstreet toward Joe Flance's saloon. Passing the intersection where Cinco Street joined Postoak, dividing the town into quarters, Cragg turned his rheumy gaze to the south.

Smudging the clean flat line of the Texas horizon was a feather of red dust, drifting to obscure the copper-rivet disk of the sun. The first herd of the Chisholm Trail's new season was behind that fumerole of dust, flaunting a red banner which warned of impending trouble for the trail towns strung along its path.

Soon there would be dozens of such smudges fouling the skyline, around the



clock and for weeks on end. One day soon, Slash W's pool herd from the San Saba would come across the curvature of that horizon, and bed down on the sage flats beyond the boothill graveyard where Jutt Leedom's grave lay under a year's growth of weeds.

A bullet from Cliff Cragg's .45 had put the Slash W boss six feet under. It mattered not to Slash W that Leedom had murdered a man during a poker game in the Blue Palace. To Moss Wetrip, Leedom's death was classified as unfinished business. . .

With that thought riding him, Cragg pushed through the Blue Palace's batwings and approached the bar. He was conscious of the abrupt hush which congealed the room at his entrance, and knew Joe Flance had been talking about him.

FLANCE WAS tending bar now, a rare concession for the carpetbagger boss of Longhorn. He was a chunky-built man of fifty, whose bullet head was topped by a shoebrush pompadour in the Prussian fashion, his front teeth capped with gold, an absurdly large diamond winking in his cravat knot. Trimmings which went with the most affluent citizen on the Trail.

"A word with you, Mayor," the marshal said, ignoring the mocking stares of Flance's floor men at a nearby poker table. "In private."

Joe Flance's gold teeth glinted to accentuate the predatory droop of his lips. At the moment, he was setting a bottle and shot glass in front of the Rocking V rider. Lining the brass rail on the far side of the stranger were a half-dozen drovers whose stubbled faces and dust-grimed clothing branded them as members of a trail crew, riding into town in advance of their north-bound cattle—the herd even now bearing over the skyline, Cragg judged.

"Whatever you got to say to me," Flance grunted, "can be said in front of my customers, marshal."

"Word reached me today that Wetrip's Slash W outfit is due at the Red before long," the marshal said quietly. "I reckon you know what to do when they show up."

The cowhands lining the bar seemed to

have forgotten their drinks. Leaning against the mahogany, they eyed Cragg and the bartender as if sensing the undercurrent of hatred which flowed between these two.

"So, now," Flance drawled, hooking his thumbs in the shoulder straps of his bar apron. "You speak in riddles this morning, Giff. Before you go on, did the Paige girl see you this morning?"

A jeering laugh came from the poker table where Flance's idle house men were gathered. Cragg felt a red tide lift above his collar, and cursed inward at this proof that the mayor's thrust had struck home.

"Lucy delivered the council's walking papers, yeah," Cragg answered. "And I know what that means. You're importing a new marshal who's supposed to turn Longhorn wide open, follow your orders to the letter. That right, Flance?"

Flance's gold-tooth grin widened.

"We need a marshal who won't try to drive business away from town, yeah," admitted the Yankee mayor. "The way you been closing up saloons every time some drover lets off steam, you're giving Longhorn a bad reputation among the men who spend their money here. The new marshal will know what side his bread's buttered on, I reckon."

Cragg decided to let that ride. "Getting back to my riddle talk about the Slash W, your memory ain't that short, Mayor."

"Slash W's patronage is something I anticipate every trail season, marshal," the carpetbagger said unctuously. "They spend their wages in my establishment and for that I am grateful, as any business man should be."

Cragg's mouth compressed. For three seasons straight, the Blue Palace had been the scene of gun fights which were traceable to Slash W's patronage.

"You'll lock up the Palace as soon as Slash W shows up, Mayor. If the new marshal's on duty then and if he thinks otherwise, that's his business. As long as I'm toting this star, the Palace is out of bounds to any and all Wetrip riders."

Joe Flance leaned across the bar, his eyes aglint with an obscure amusement.

"You're a trifle late with your ultimatum this year, Giff. Slash W's advance guard is already here. If you'd read the

brands on the saddle stock lining my rack on Cinco, you'd have known that before you come in. Or did you?"

Cragg's gnarled fingers clamped around his cartridge belt. Following the direction of Flance's quick sideward glance, the marshal had his answer. The five cowhands at the bar this morning were Slash W men.

At Cragg's elbow, the Rocking V man was toying with his whiskey glass, apparently a disinterested onlooker to this scene. Meeting Cragg's eye, the drifter nodded confirmation.

"Slash W's beef is moving into bed-ground tonight, marshal," the stranger said. "They aim to ford the Red tomorrow. First outfit into the Nations this year. I picked up that letter for you only yesterday.

Cragg laid his mineral-hard glance on the five cowhands who lined the bar, waiting for his reaction.

*This is the test Wetrip sent my way, he was thinking. They're waiting to see if I'll back down, drag wagons before Wetrip rides in for a showdown . . .*

Ignoring the Slash W riders, Cragg turned to Flance. "I'll be back in an hour, Mayor. I expect to find a padlock on your door by then."

He turned back to the Slash W drovers and gestured toward the door. "Soon as you've downed your drinks, trail your spurs out of here. Flance's saloon isn't catering to Slash W this year."

The Slash W man nearest to Cragg—the marshal recognized him now as being a breed cavy wrangler named Pancho Beetham—hooked the spike heel of a cowboot on the brass rail and shook his head slowly.

"We're thirsty, marshal. Happens we always patronize the Blue Palace when we hit Longhorn. I reckon we're staying until the rest of our outfit shows up."

Cragg met the taunt in Beetham's narrowed eyes, read the significance of the four drovers behind the breed wrangler as they stepped away from the bar, clearing their gun butts for action. His glance shifted back once more to Joe Flance.

"Like I said, I'll be back in an hour, Mayor," he repeated. "Have a lock on your door."

So speaking, Cragg turned to leave.

Then, even as the Slash W riders went slack and started to swivel back to the bar, Cragg spun on his heels and his twin Colts were out of leather, snapped into the open with all the old-time speed that made Cragg's draw a legend up and down the Trail.

"You said you aimed to stay around, Beetham!" the marshal snapped, his gun muzzles swinging in a V to cover the dismayed drovers. "You will. In my calaboose. You'll stay around until Wetrip's herd is well into the Nations next week."

Caught flat-footed by the old marshal's guns, Pancho Beetham and his four trail mates had no alternative but to lift their arms well away from gun stocks.

Behind the bar, Joe Flance's pink-sleeved arms moved surreptitiously under his counter, to lift a double-barreled shotgun from the shelf there.

Reading that moveemnt through the tail of his eye, Cragg knew the Mayor of Longhorn intended to butcher him with buckshot. There could be no preventing it, with Flance slightly behind him. To swing his guns to meet the bartender's threat would be to expose himself to the lightning draws of the bayed Slash W hands, waiting for this very opportunity.

It was the Rocking V puncher who stepped into the breach. Even as Flance got his sawed-off scattergun above the bar level, he found himself staring into the bore of a long-barreled Peacemaker which the Rocking V rider slid across the mahogany.

"Put the greener back, Mister Mayor!" ordered the stranger. "I'd hate to tally the man who hired me to come up here to wear the marshal's star before I even reported for duty."

### III

JOE FLANCE EASED DOWN THE twin hammers of the buckshot gun, returning the weapon to its under-bar shelf with an alacrity which would have been amusing under less strained circumstances.

"You're — Duane Redfern?" Flance cawed incredulously.

Giff Cragg turned to stare at the whip-py-built stranger at his elbow, knowing he owed his life to the man's cool interven-



tion. He saw the stranger nod, keeping his Colt resting on the bar.

"I came in here to introduce myself," Redfern said, "but I didn't get the chance. I—"

Pancho Beetham made his play then, knowing Cragg was off guard. His left arm lowered as he half-turned away from the bar and then the splayed fingers of his right hand swept toward his flanks and whipped a gun from holster.

Simultaneously with the gun's whipping upthrust, the breed lunged sideways along the bar to pin down Duane Redfern's gun with the elbow of his left arm. With the stranger momentarily out of the play, Beetham swung his gun toward the marshal. The whole smoothly-coordinated motion had occupied less than a clock-tick of time.

Giff Cragg had the Slash W cavvy wrangler under a cold drop. His brain, as razor-edged as it had ever been, telegraphed its shooting orders to Cragg's trigger finger.

But disease-stiffened sinews failed to respond for a time-lag that could only be measured in hundredths of a second. And during that lag, Beetham squeezed off his shot.

Cragg heard the explosion of the breed's gun, felt its concussion and the sting of burned powder pelting his face. His own Colt thundered then, but at point-blank range his slug raced through space and missed Beetham's broad chest by a margin wide enough to send the bullet slamming into Flance's back-bar mirror.

*Missed!* Cragg heard an accusing voice resound inside his stunned brain. *Missed a target close enough to touch. I've lost my gun savvy, just like Flance has been telling the town . . .*

It seemed to Cragg that time had slowed down to a crawl. Everything that happened was crystal clear in Cragg's eyes, but its tempo had been reduced to an unreal slow-motion, losing the illusion of reality. His senses seemed to be swimming against an invisible pressure, like the drag of a nightmare.

Through his own lifting gunsmoke he saw Beetham cocking his gunhammer for a second try. Out of the tail of his eye he was aware that Duane Redfern was still trying to wrench his gun out from under

the pressure of the halfbreed's elbow, at the same time swinging a spurred boot up toward Beetham's crotch.

The kick landed on the wrangler's groin, doubling him up, causing him to drop the smoking Colt. Beetham was out of the fight, but behind him the four Slash W riders had their guns out of leather.

Cragg, fighting the shackles which burdened his reflexes, swung his own .45s to meet their menace, and then, unaccountably, he discovered that his left arm was a dead weight, that he did not have the strength to raise the burden of the six-gun it held.

The strength left his knees then, and he sagged floorward. But the four Slash W punchers lined before him did not open fire at their kneeling target. They were backing off, arms lifting.

Shaking his head stupidly, Cragg saw Duane Redfern step between him and Beetham's writhing shape. Redfern was stepping from man to man along the bar, stripping Colts from holsters and tossing them into a sandbox cuspidor. As Redfern disarmed the last Slash W rider, Joe Flance rallied out of his daze and snarled out, "You're taking orders from me, Redfern. You're the new marshal here. You should be dehornin' Cragg instead of—"

Ignoring the bartender, Duane Redfern turned toward Cragg.

"Hit bad, Pop?"

"Hit?" Cragg repeated numbly. *Lucy's told him about me, else he wouldn't have called me Pop, the irrelevant thought flashed through his head. "I ain't hit, son . . ."*

"Like hell you ain't—"

C RAGG didn't feel his left-hand gun slip from his hand, but his eyes focused on the spreading crimson stain which was sopping his sleeve. Blood was trickling in warm streams from his fingertips. The first slow, flickering stabs of pain lanced up his shoulder then, and he knew the truth. That first shot of Pancho's had drilled through muscle and sinew to splinter his elbow.

The shock of bullet numbness passed. Cragg forced himself back to his feet, his wrecked arm dangling at his side.

"Redfern!" shouted Joe Flance. "As marshal, your duty is—"

Redfern silenced the Longhorn mayor with an angry oath. "I'm not your marshal, not till I'm sworn in. I come up here a couple days early to size up my new job. From what I've seen up to now, I ain't so sure I'm your man, Flance."

C RAGG GRINNED, a clammy ooze of perspiration popping from his flesh, but a triumphant song in his heart. Duane Redfern might have a gunhawk's rep down on the Rio Grande. The way things stacked up now, Cragg believed his gamble had paid off. Redfern was a Cragg. His sire's blood was counting here at the payoff . . .

"You—know where my jail is, son," Cragg whispered. "I'd be obliged if you trot these buckaroos along. I'll foller directly."

Joe Flance's face was a bloodless mask of anger and frustration as he watched Redfern haul Pancho Beetham off the floor. All the fight seemed to have fled from the Slash W crew as they obeyed Redfern's gesturing gun barrel and filed through the street door.

Cragg turned to meet Joe Flance's apoplectic stare.

"Looks like you picked the wrong man to fill my boots, Joe!" Cragg couldn't help one gloating jibe. "You figgered to turn Longhorn into a trap where your saloons and crooked gamblin' layouts could bleed the drovers white. You damned ignorant Yankee, it was me who sent for Redfern in the first place!"

Cragg braced his shoulders, fighting the nausea which assailed the pit of his stomach. He hefted the gun in his right hand, savoring the fierce exultation which kept him on his feet.

Flance licked his lips, uncertainty beginning to crack his iron front. He saw his deep-laid schemes evaporating in thin air, realized that this senile star-toter had been secretly pulling strings, out-witting Flance at his own game.

"I'm turnin' my star over to young Redfern in due time," Cragg bit out. "But, before I do, I'm carryin' out one last job while I'm bull of the herd around here. I'm givin' you yore choice of goin' to jail or lockin' up the Palace, Joe. And it'll stay locked up until Wetrip's out of Texas."

Flance lifted a flap in the bar counter and stepped out front, shrugging off his bar apron. Passing in front of Cragg's following gun muzzle, he gestured toward his house men at the nearby card table. They were all armed and they were waiting for Flance's signal to cut the marshal down.

"Redfern showing up unannounced alters the situation, men," Flance grunted. "I'm closing the house—temporarily."

Cragg, dribbling his blood across the sawdust-sprinkled floor, waited while the card players filed out of the batwings, Flance following them.

Out on the saloon porch, the marshal stood by while the mayor padlocked the batwings and unhooked the seldom-used outer doors of the Blue Palace, closing and locking them likewise.

"I'll impound those keys, Joe," Cragg said, holstering his gun and extending a rock-steady hand.

For the briefest of moments Flance hesitated. Then he passed over his key-ring, saw Cragg pocket it.

Cragg wheeled and walked down the Blue Palace steps, turning east down Postoak. He found Duane Redfern waiting at the jail office, riding close herd on Beetham and the four Slash W cowboys.

When Cragg reached the jail steps he turned into the office and got his keys from the desk.

Five minutes later the Slash W trouble-makers were behind cell bars and Cragg was locking the bullpen door. Duane Redfern stepped out into the marshal's office, scowling anxiously as he sized up the oldster's bleeding arm.

With a wry grin, Cragg turned to the younger man. Emotions which the town would never guess had put an ache in his throat as, for the first time, he had an opportunity to size up Redfern.

He found himself wondering why he had not recognized the man on the Rocking V horse, the moment he rode into town. Anybody, it seemed, should be able to detect the blood kinship of these two. Redfern had the same lithic cast of face, the same metal-blue eyes and rocky jaw of his sire. At thirty-one, Duane Redfern's massive torso and hard-calloused hands were a dead ringer for Giff Cragg in his prime . . .



"You're taking a quick *pasear* to a medico, old timer!" Redfern's voice came to Cragg's ears, muffled as if by remote distance. "You've lost a lot of blood—"

Cragg's good hand was plucking at the star on his vest.

"If you hadn't showed up a couple days early, I'd be buzzard bait in Flance's saloon this minute, son," Cragg whispered numbly. "I've gone stale. Rusted tight as a barn gate. It's time this—star—changed hands—"

Blackness swirled around the old lawman then. He was not aware of Duane Redfern leaping to catch his sagging body.

#### IV

LUCY PAIGE ELBOWED HER way through the press of Stetson-clad onlookers grouped in front of Doc Growbinder's office on Cinco Street, to find Duane Redfern posted at the doorway to keep out morbid spectators.

Redfern's eyes flashed their secret message to the girl as she gained the doorstep. The sickish-sweet effluvium of chloroform wafted from the doctor's office to assail the girl's nostrils.

"Duane—is Pop—is he hurt bad? I heard the shooting in the Palace—"

Redfern grinned harshly as he stepped aside to let her pass inside.

"He caught a slug in the left elbow. Doc Growbinder may amputate, may not. Sure you want to go in there?"

Lucy nodded, blinded with tears as she passed through the cowtown medico's outer office and stepped into the operating room. Old Cragg lay on Growbinder's table, covered with a sheet from the waist down. Growbinder was removing scalpels and probes, forceps and hemostats from a sterilizing kettle and arranging them neatly on a boiled towel alongside the table.

Cragg, she saw, was under the anesthetic, but a pulse was beating strongly on his weather-bronzed throat.

"Is it bad, Doc?" the girl asked in a choked whisper.

Growbinder snorted in his brush of whiskers and began swabbing the wound with a pad of sterile cotton, a gleaming probe poised in his right hand.

"Old marshals never die, Lucy," he

commented. "They wither up like a tumbleweed, but they don't cash in their chips from a bullet in the arm."

Lucy assisted the cowtown medico in splinting and bandaging the marshal's arm after Growbinder had removed the shapeless pellet of lead from the shattered tissues.

"Good girl," Growbinder complimented her. "He'll rally around shortly. That arm won't be worth a damn so far as gun-totin' is concerned, but with the new marshal here, Giff won't need to worry about that handicap nohow."

Duane Redfern joined the girl as she left the doctor's shack by a back door to avoid the curious throng out on Cinco Street. Walking across back lots toward the Trail House, Redfern waited until they were in the privacy of the hotel office before pulling her close and crushing her mouth to his own.

"You think a lot of that old star-toter," Redfern said, building a cigarette, some minutes later.

She nodded. "I love him next to my own father, Duane. He wrote you about taking over his job just to bring us together. That's the kind of man Giff Cragg is. Losing his star is no easy thing. It's his very life."

Duane Redfern eyed the girl through pluming cigarette smoke. For months he had hungered for her presence, but now in this moment of reunion he found his mind sliding off to other matters, concentrating on the old man who lay in Doc Growbinder's makeshift hospital.

"I drifted into town unannounced," Redfern said, "to sort of size up the lay of the land before I took over Cragg's job. I like to know where the weight lies in a new town."

Lucy Paige eyed him quizzically. "Did you find out why the mayor was so eager to hire you, Duane? There's so much about this that doesn't show on the surface. I didn't have a chance to write you before Joe Flance announced that you were on your way up here—"

Obscure lights kindled in Redfern's eyes. "Flance thinks he's hired my guns to make Longhorn wide open, like the other hell-holes up and down the Trail. I think—" Redfern paused to study the glowing coal on his cigarette—"I think

Mayor F lance is going to be asking for my resignation before too long. I don't intend to pin on a star just to make Longhorn safe for his saloons and gambling houses."

Lucy Paige's eyes glowed with love. "Duane, you've stepped into the picture just in time to see Pop face the toughest situation of his career," she said. "Moss Wetrip's crew will be showing up in Longhorn soon. Pop killed Wetrip's trail boss at the Palace last year. Everyone knows Slash W will be gunning for Pop the moment they hit town."

"Pop's proud, and he's game," Redfern mused. "I almost feel as if I'd known him all my life, instead of less than an hour. Lucy—I shan't gall him by taking over his star before he's squared his accounts with Moss Wetrip. Win, lose or draw—I figger that's how Pop wants it."

Leaving the Trail House, Redfern stabled his blue roan and returned to Doc Growbinder's. He was astonished to find that Giff Cragg had not only rallied out of the anesthetic, but was fully dressed even to the twin shellbelts around his middle. The marshal's ruined arm hung in a flour-sack sling across his chest.

"Let's go over to my office," Cragg suggested. "By rights, you should be wearin' my star now, son. But I got a personal deal to settle that's been a long time building up. If you can savvy—"

Duane Redfern laughed softly. "Moss Wetrip? He's your meat, marshal. You play out the hand that was dealt you before I sit in."

Reaching the jail office, Giff Cragg eased himself into his swivel chair and turned his inscrutable eye on the younger man.

"Might as well git acquainted, son," he said finally. "Goes without saying, all Texas knows how you cleaned up San 'Tone an' Tascosa. Further than that, you're just a waddy that Lucy Paige fell in love with. But she hasn't told me much about you."

REDFERN LEANED the point of his shoulder against the iron door of the bull pen and regarded the old marshal thoughtfully.

"Not much to tell, Cragg," he said. "Grew up in San Antone. My mother

was a school teacher, my father a buffalo hunter. They both died before I was old enough to remember them. In a cholera epidemic."

Cragg averted his eyes. He hadn't known that. Old memories swirled about him, a nostalgia that left him mute. He pulled himself back to reality to see Duane Redfern holding out a gold locket.

"This locket belonged to my mother," he grinned. "It's all I have to recall my parents."

Giff Cragg sucked a breath to the bottom of his lungs as he found himself staring at a tintype inside the locket. It was a duplicate, save for minor variations in pose, of the picture he had carried inside his turnip watch for three decades.

"You—you've done right well for an orphan, son," Cragg said huskily. "Now about you and Lucy Paige—I've knowed her since she was knee-high to the loadin' gate of a Winchester, son. Mind tellin' an old man yore future plans?"

"We aim to get married as soon as the trail drive season slacks off this fall," Redfern said softly.

Cragg looked up, meeting the young gunhawk's steady gaze as he handed back the locket which he himself had given to Patrice Redfern in the dim, half-forgotten past. It eased an old hurt in his heart, knowing she had kept that locket.

"Don't put off that weddin', boy. Wearin' a marshal's star in this town is the same as havin' your lease on life expire and be renewed every hour of the day or night. No sense in gamblin' on missin' out on even an hour's happiness. You see, son, I—"

A swelling roar of hoofbeats drummed down the false-fronted channel of Post oak Street, the swift crescendo of thundering hoofs making the flimsy walls of the jail office tremble.

Lifting himself from his chair, Giff Cragg hobbled swiftly to the jailhouse door and peered through the dust at the fast blurring passage of riders streaking past.

Whooping shrilly and shooting the sky full of holes, the Texans reined to a dusty halt in front of the Blue Palace saloon, swung out of stirrups and started hitching up at F lance's tie rack.

Moss Wetrip and his Slash W bunch,"



Cragg grunted succinctly. He was speaking to himself, as if he had forgotten the reality of his successor's presence.

Redfern remained in the jailhouse doorway as old Cragg stepped down onto the spur-scuffed plank sidewalk and headed up Postoak, crossing Cinco Street just as the newly-arrived trail crew assembled in front of the locked doors of Joe Flance's place.

Moss Wetrip's massive figure dominated the group of chap-clad, gun-hung riders. He was a giant of a man, bull-necked and barrel-chested, in his middle forties. The beginnings of a paunch showed where his tight-buckled shellbelts crisscrossed his midriff.

Rattling the knob of the Blue Palace door, the Slash W boss swung around to speak to his riders—when he caught sight of Giff Cragg's raw-boned shape mounting the steps at the far end of the wooden-awned porch.

"What's this, Cragg?" demanded Wetrip, all his old hates flashing in his eyes as the man with the star approached. "Has Joe Flance gone out of business since we were here last?"

Cragg shook his head, his narrowed gaze ranging over the hostile faces of the Slash W crew, recognizing men who had seen him smoke down Jutt Leedom a year ago, inside this very saloon. They were here, the first of the Chisholm Trail outfits to reach the Red, and they were obviously loaded for bear.

"Flance's place is locked up permanent, so far as Slash W is concerned," Cragg said levelly. "If you're lookin' for Pancho Beetham and the gunslingers you sent up ahead this mornin', you'll find them down at my calaboose."

Moss Wetrip's gooseberry-green eyes took on a lethal glint. "You've jailed my riders? For what?"

Cragg motioned toward his bandaged ram.

"For shootin' a law officer, for one thing. You can stick around for their trial, if you want. Unless you're in a rush to get your beef to Dodge."

Moss Wetrip rubbed his whisker-stubbed jaw thoughtfully, keeping a tight curb on his mounting temper. It was inconceivable that this broken-down old gaffer could have man-handled men like

tough Pancho Beetham and the others.

"I see," the Nueces ranchers drawled finally. "It's plain you didn't get a certain letter I sent up the trail yesterday by a saddle bum—"

Cragg glanced around. He saw Joe Flance emerging from the Jack of Diamonds gambling hall across the street, heading toward the Blue Palace to join Wetrip's crew.

"I got a letter," Cragg admitted, "which the writer didn't have the guts to sign."

Wetrip's flush receded, leaving his face skull-white.

"This trial you speak of," Wetrip changed the subject abruptly for obscure reasons of his own. "When's it coming off?"

Cragg shrugged. "That depends on Judge Campbell's court docket over at the county seat," he said. "Mebbe a month from now. Mebbe sooner."

Joe Flance elbowed through the ranks of Slash W punchers, breaking the tension which held the group. Words passed between Flance and Wetrip which the marshal's half-deaf ears couldn't catch.

Whatever the cowtown mayor had told Wetrip, Cragg saw that the Slash W boss had dismissed his half-formed intention of forcing a gun fight here on the street.

"I'm riding back to see my herd bedded down for the night, marshal," Wetrip said, turning to Cragg. "I'll expect Pancho and my other drivers to show up at the Slash W chuck wagon before sundown. If they ain't back, I'll come for 'em. Get that?"

Cragg remained on the Blue Palace porch after Wetrip's bunch had fogged out of town. They were accompanied by Joe Flance, the significance of which was not lost on the old lawman.

Duane Redfern, toting his warsack over from the livery barn on his way to the Trail House, halted in front of the saloon for a last word with the oldster.

"Wetrip will pull your jail down brick by brick tonight, Pop. He's not running because you've buffaloeed him."

Cragg nodded, grinning enigmatically.

"No, he ain't. Slash W aims to pry the lid off Longhorn before sun-up tomorrow, I grant you that."

Redfern shifted the weight of his war-

sack on a husky shoulder. "Better swear me in as a deputy, Pop."

Cragg shook his head.

"I'll handle this myself, thanks. All I ask is that you keep Lucy off the streets tonight."

## V

**M**OSS WETRIP'S SUNDOWN deadline found Pancho Beetham and his four trail partners cleaning up the supper trays which Cliff Cragg brought them from the Trail House restaurant.

As night pooled in swathing violet waves across the Texas flats, Cragg kept his eye on the sprawled blot of the big Slash W pool herd which was bedded down a mile from town.

The import of Slash W's nearness had laid its oppressive weight over the trail town. Mothers called their children off the streets in response to some tacit curfew. The darkened windows of the Blue Palace were matched by other deadfalls up and down Postoak Street which ordinarily would have been ablaze with light, inviting the season's first drovers.

Over in the jailhouse, the Slash W prisoners were in high spirits, knowing they were the focal point of tonight's unrest. From the barred windows of their cells they could see Wetrip's campfire light winking and shuttering across the starlit distance. Help would not be long in coming their way. And what chance did a one-armed, stove-up marshal have of stemming the tide of violence which he would inevitably have to face, single-handed?

For his part, Giff Cragg appeared to be making little if any preparation for the defense of the jail. Shortly before sundown he had accosted his deputy, Slats McBride, eating supper at the Trail House and had advised that individual not to report for duty at midnight. That order saved McBride the humiliation of carrying out his decision to take off his star.

As darkness congealed over the town, Cragg busied himself with mysterious activity in his furnace shed out behind the jail. He had a fire going in the brick furnace, heating the water in the old Red River ferryboat boiler.

Stoking the firebox with cordwood rick-  
ed alongside the jail, Cragg kept an eye

on the steam gauge on the boilerhead, until the pressure approached the limit of the safety valve. Then he banked his fire, closed the grate door, and shuffled his way around to the front office. There, he unlocked the iron door leading to the bullpen.

At ten o'clock, Cragg lit his meerschaum and locked up his jail office. By now, every establishment on Postoak Street was dark, precluding the necessity of making his usual tour of the trail town's trouble spots.

The street appeared to be completely deserted. Longhorn, instead of celebrating the arrival of the season's first herd from the *brasada* country, had become a ghost town.

The clock in the schoolhouse belfry was chiming twelve midnight when Giff Cragg, seated on the porch of the saddle shop across Postoak from the jail, saw riders materializing out of the night, coming from the direction of the Slash W bedground.

He might be getting deaf, but Cragg imagined he heard the creaking of leather as men off-saddled, the metallic clink of bit rings as a dozen or more riders dismounted in a cope of dwarf hickory down by the Red River crossing, the site of Cragg's old camp in by-gone years before Longhorn had assumed the proportions of a Chisholm Trail town.

Easing his gun out of leather, Cragg checked the loads in the cylinder with a practised thumb. Then he strained his failing eyes, probing the darkness until he saw the first of a group of skulking figures arrive in front of the weather-bleached clapboard front of the jailhouse office.

Watching from across the street, Cragg saw sombreroed riders getting a wagon tongue ready to use as a battering ram. One of the group mounted the front steps and hammered on the locked door with a gun barrel, his warning shout echoing spectrally off Longhorn's false front.

"Open up, marshal. We've come for your prisoners."

A long silence followed. Then, at a grunted signal from their leader, the men assembled in front of the Longhorn jail swung their wagon tongue in unison.

Wood panelling splintered and metal made its abrasive crash as the wagon tongue hit the flimsy door, shattering its



lock. As the door crashed inwards, a shout went up from the jail-breakers.

Cragg stepped to the front edge of the saddle shop porch. He heard a thunder of spurred boots resounding on the door of his office as Wetrip's drovers trooped inside, surprised at this easy conquest of their first barrier.

A triumphant voice reached his ears. "The bullpen door ain't locked men. Cragg must have lit a shuck.

Giff Cragg left the saddle shop porch then, moving swiftly across the street to enter his office. Pandemonium filled the interior of the cell block. Wetrip's crew had gathered in front of Beetham's cell.

With reckless disregard for his own safety, Giff Cragg crossed his office and pulled the iron door of the bull pen shut, easing down the heavy outer bar in its sockets to pen the jail breakers inside the brick-walled enclosure.

**G**UNSHOTS thundered their deafening chorus inside the cell block as the Slash W bunch began their attempt to shoot off the locks of the steel-barred cages to free their saddle mates.

Cragg did not tarry in the front office. Heading outside, he trotted down the black alley between the jail and the livery barn next door and ducked into his furnace room.

In the darkness, his arthritic hands groped for and found the big valve which led from the churning steam boiler. A two-inch pipe led into the bullpen from the boiler, the inlet for the system of heating pipes which Cragg had intended to build inside the jail during the coming months.

One revolution of the valve wheel sent a deafening jet of live steam into the jail. The roar of the escaping steam drowned the dismayed reaction of the men trapped within.

Mentally counting off one minute's elapsed time, Giff Cragg closed the boiler valve and went outside. Under the nearest cell window, the old marshal shouted his orders:

"Pitch your shootin' irons out of the west winder, gents. You got thirty seconds to fork over before I turn that valve on again and scald you like a barbecue calf on a spit!"

White steam, vaporizing inside the jail, was pouring out of the cell windows, wisping under the eaves. Wetrip's crew knew by now that they were at Cragg's mercy, that they were helplessly imprisoned in what amounted to a brick torture-chamber.

One by one, six-guns and rifles began cascading through the west window of the bull pen, landing in the alley at Cragg's feet. When the last gun had come hurtling out of the steam-jetting window, Cragg lifted his voice again.

"Sing out, Wetrip. I'll tell you what to do next, before I give you tough cases another dose of live steam."

There was a momentary silence from the steam-filled bullpen.

Then the hoarse voice of the breed cavy wrangler, Pancho Beetham, made uncertain answer:

"The boss ain't in here, marshal. I swear it!"

Cragg stiffened, the hairs on his neck-nape prickling. "All right—have Joe Flance show his face at the window."

Beetham shouted desperately, "Flance ain't here either. Don't touch that steam contraption, marshal, for the love of Pete—you'll cook us alive!"

Instinct rather than anything he saw or heard, caused Giff Cragg to whirl around to face the rear of the jail alley then. He glimpsed two shapes silhouetted against the star-powdered horizon, coming from the direction of the livery barn corrals. Moss Wetrip and Joe Flance, moving up fast—

Before he could get his gun to a level, the marshal saw the stabbing nozzle of flame spit from the bore of Wetrip's gun. A sledgehammer blow caught Cragg on the hip and dropped him back against the jail wall.

He forced himself to hold his gun centered on the fuzzy blurred shape that was Wetrip's running figure, waiting for the Slash W boss to get within point-blank range.

Joe Flance triggered a shot and his bullet smashed the marshal in the side. He felt the white lash of pain go through him as he tripped gunhammer, saw Wetrip's headlong rush checked.

Blackness spun about the marshal as he saw the bull-sized Slash W rancher go.

down, stopped cold by Cragg's lead. But behind Joe Flance other black shapes were taking form, Slash W riders running in from the open prairie. It seemed incredible that Slash W had brought such a sizeable crew over for this jailbreak attempt, that only half their number were trapped in the jail.

"Cragg's down, men!" Joe Flance was yelling, waving his henchmen toward the alley. "He'll have the keys to those cells on him——"

Then, above the roaring in his head, Giff Cragg heard a gun explode behind him, close at hand. He twisted around to see a tall shape emerge from the livery stable's side door, and he knew then that he was caught in a cross-fire.

Flame was spitting from the guns of the newcomer who had been crouching inside the stable's clotted shadows. Incredibly, those fast-shooting Colts were aimed at Wetrip's drovers, not at him.

Cragg felt his consciousness slipping as the black vortex caught him, engulfed him. Through it, as if from a great void of distance, he heard Duane Redfern's voice close to his ear.

"It's finished, Pop. Flance is down and the others are high-tailing it . . ."

**A** FRESH BREEZE off the sage-scented prairie was stirring the curtains of a Trail House bedroom window when Cragg rallied out of it. He was lying on a bed, between cool sheets, and morning sunlight was shafting down on him.

Pain throbbed at isolated points on his withered frame, at his hip and on his side just under the ribs, but he felt strangely at peace.

Glancing around the room, Cragg saw vague shapes swim into focus in the bright Texas sunlight. Familiar faces. Duane Redfern and Lucy Paige, standing at the foot of his bed. Hovering closer at hand was the old sawbones, Doc Growbinder, a stethoscope swinging from his ears.

"Time you come to, Giff," Growbinder was grumbling. "You've already missed seein' Joe Flance an' Moss Wetrip take their one-way ride to boothill. The Slash W crew didn't even stick around for the

funeral. Them that weren't penned up in your steam-heated calaboose rattled their hocks across the river to let their trail herd shift for itself."

Giff Cragg, groping hard to comprehend what Growbinder was saying, propped himself up on one elbow to stare at something the cowtown medico held in his hand.

It was the bullet-drilled remains of his turnip watch. Remembering the hammer blow on his hip, Wetrip's first shot, Cragg understood. His watch had absorbed the full brunt of that drilling impact.

The marshal of Longhorn swung his gaze to the other side of the bed, in time to see the doctor hand his shattered timepiece over to Duane Redfern. There was a strange grin plucking at the corners of the young town-tamer's lips as he held up the misshapen watch case so that Cragg could see the bullet-punctured tintype photograph soldered on its inner side.

"Where'd you get this picture, Pop?" Redfern wanted to know.

Cragg closed his eyes and grinned. "That's a photygraph of me an' my wife an' baby son. It—it makes a tol'able long story, how I come to have it. Mebbe after you an' Lucy get married, some time I'll tell that story to your children."

Lucy Paige bent over the wasted figure on the bed and kissed Giff Cragg on the mouth.

"Duane's taking the advice you gave him, Pop," she whispered. "We're getting married today. In this very room. The padre's on his way here from San Castro."

Giff Cragg opened his eyes again, this time to find Duane Redfern kneeling beside him. A tarnished star with the brass showing through its silver plating was pinned to Redfern's shirt.

"We can't wait for your grandchildren to show up to hear that story, Pop," Duane grinned. "I got a hunch I know most of the details, anyhow."

Giff Cragg closed his eyes, not wanting to break the spell of this moment.

"Grandchildren," he repeated, awed by the shape of the word on his tongue. "Pop . . . Call me that again, son. It sounds—mighty fine. I've waited a plumb long spell to hear you call me that."



# THIRSTY TRIGGERS

*By Lee Floren*



*Big Dan choked short the gunman's words.*

**Barr Stackpool had the cattle. Jim Smith had the water. Big Dan Reynolds had only memories. But they all had guns.**

**T**HE TRAP WAS READY TO spring. They were going to kill young Jim Smith. So Big Dan Reynolds came from around his bar and said, "No gun play in here, savvy?"

Barr Stackpool growled, "This kid accused me of dealin' off the bottom of the deck, Big Dan. Nobody's accusin' me of bein' crooked!"

All night the poker game had run. And young Jim Smith had cleaned Barr Stackpool, owner of the big Circle K; he had cleaned Stackpool's gunhand, thin Pete Redfern. Stackpool and Redfern had figured it the other way around, but young

Jim's luck, and his skill with cards, had cleaned them.

Now young Jim was standing, hand on his holstered gun. His thin, boyish face was a little pale, and Big Dan got the impression that the young homesteader, for the first time, felt the raw edge of the danger these two cowmen personified. For the first time he realized they wanted to kill him.

Big Dan asked, "Did you accuse him, Jim?"

"No."

"Then they're just tryin' to pick trouble with you?"

Jim's words came slowly. "Yes."

From outside came the sweet smell of Spring's growing grass. The aroma pushed back the stale stink of beer and cigarette smoke.

Dan said, "Go back to your plowin', Jim."

Young Jim turned to go. But Barr Stackpool reached out. He grabbed the young farmer by the shoulder. "We got somethin' to settle here, Big Dan. And by hell you ain't goin' interfere—"

Big Dan hit him. The surprise blow smashed against Barr Stackpool's unprotected jaw. The cowman flung up his arm, releasing Jim Smith. He went backwards and the wall stopped him.

Redfern had reached. Big Dan hit at him, but the gunman went down low, the blow riding over him. But, for a moment, he was off-balance. And that moment gave Jim Smith the time he needed. The homesteader's .45 was out, covering Redfern.

Big Dan had his cutter out, too. Redfern stopped, gun almost over holster-clip; he looked at Jim Smith's Colt, he looked at Big Dan's .44. Then he let his weapon slide back down into leather.

Redfern said, "They got us, Stackpool."

Barr Stackpool wiped blood from his mouth with his sleeve. He looked hard at Big Dan Reynolds. "Me an' my Circle K riders have brought a lot of business to you Big Dan. We're the only big outfit in Tumbleweed Basin; from now on we buy our drinks in the Curcingle across the street. You can go to hell."

"That's all right."

Redfern was silent. His eyes were small, taking in this scene, and Big Dan studied him, for this man was the more dangerous of the two. Nothing moved across the gunman's eyes. There was nothing there—no hate, no fear, no anger. But Big Dan knew that the man was boiling inside.

Stackpool demanded, "Then you're takin' up this nester's troubles?"

Big Dan did not answer that. He said, "There'll be no murder in my saloon, Stackpool."

Stackpool's lips hardened, but still Redfern was silent. Finally Redfern said, "I guess it's our move, boss. An' I'd say that

move was to go out of this joint." He shrugged and walked for the door.

Big Dan swiveled his .44, covering the gunman. Barr Stackpool said, "To hell with you, Big Dan," and followed his gunhand. The batwing doors moved twice, and Big Dan, still holding his gun, stood and listened to their boots run down the plank sidewalk.

He was silent. Young Jim Smith was silent, too.

FROM out on the street came the rapid pounds of running hoofs. They took up power and cadence, and Redfern and Stackpool loped by. They loped past the door, the hoofs lost their power, and the sound ran out and died. Only then did Big Dan Reynolds holster his gun.

"Thanks, Big Dan," murmured Jim Smith.

Big Dan said, "Pick up your winnings."

Jim stacked up the quarters and half-dollars and dollars on top of the paper money. Big Dan was wiping the bar with a damp towel. Jim put a ten dollar bill on the bar. "Your rake-off, Dan."

Dan took the bill.

Jim Smith hesitated. "I'm damn sorry this happened. You took in a nice sum each month from the Circle K riders."

"They'll come back," Dan said. "Barr Stackpool can't tell his hands where they'll drink their whiskey. You can't push a cowpoke aroun' like he's a steer in a loadin' chute."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

Dan stopped wiping the bar. His eyes were level. "What are you goin' to do, Jim?"

Jim said, "I develop my homestead, Dan. It's my home, an' Millie's home, an' it'll be the baby's home when he comes."

"You know what that means, now?"

Jim Smith spoke slowly. "Yes, I guess I do, Dan. It means guns, and nothing more."

"You an' Matt Jensen, the Bear Crick nester, will be buckin' Bar Stackpool's Circle K riders. Do you think you can do that?"

"I don't know. I'll try."

Big Dan Reynolds saw the youth's bottom lip quiver. It reminded him of Jim's mother; she had that same gesture when facing a big problem. It reminded him of



thoughts and memories he'd once thought dead. . . .

"You're a fool, Jim."

"Maybe I'm a fightin' fool," Jim Smith said.

The youth left, and Big Dan Reynolds was alone in his saloon. The morning trade would be coming in soon; he was sleepy for he'd been up all night watching the poker game. Young Jim Smith, he figured, was about twenty-one. Big Dan and Jim's father, Ray Smith, had come into Flat Rock thirty years before, coming up the Powder River trail chousing a Mill Iron trailherd.

Both had been cowpunchers through circumstances and not by choice. Big Dan had started his saloon and the Northern Pacific had built through shortly afterwards; Ray Smith had become Flat Rock's depot agent. Down at the Silver Spoon Cafe young Hattie Mueller had waited table. She had dark hair and dark eyes and Big Dan and Ray Smith had tried to win the favor of those dark eyes.

Ray Smith had married her. Jim had come—their only child—and when Jim was fifteen, six years ago, his dad had been killed while uncoupling stock cars, shooting them into siding on the Flat Rock tracks. His mother had died two years later from tuberculosis.

Big Dan Reynolds had lost the only woman he had ever wanted to marry. Young Jim had gone into the Spanish-American war and come home all in one piece. Tumbleweed Basin was thrown open to homesteading with the provision only war veterans could file on the land.

Jim had filed on Tumbleweed Springs. Barr Stackpool, who had gained ownership of the Mill Iron and changed the brand to the Circle K, had to stand by and watch; he'd seen his best water-hole go under fence. Another veteran, Matt Jensen, had filed on Bear Creek, and another Circle K water supply was under fence. These were the only two spots on Tumbleweed Basin that could be turned into farms. The rest of the valley was just cattle-land, and nothing more until—if ever—irrigation water was turned on it.

Jim had met an army nurse, married her, and built a home on Tumbleweed Springs. They had wintered there and now Jim's plow was turning over the dark

loam. And it was also turning over trouble.

"Not my business," Big Dan told himself.

He arranged the bottles on his backshelf. They were almost a hundred miles from the county seat—over in Malta—; otherwise, he'd called the sheriff in on this. But by the time a man got over there and back— He stopped working, heavy face sober. He remembered Hattie's words.

"Ray's gone now, Big Dan. My boy is only fifteen. He needs a dad now more than ever. Dan, would you keep an eye on him?"

He had looked at her and her dark beauty had stirred him again. She was in her late forties and middle-age had added weight to her but still she held to her girlish beauty.

"Hattie," he had said softly, "why don't you marry me?"

"I'm sick, Dan. The doctor doesn't know what is wrong with me."

"I'm sorry, Hattie. I shouldn't have asked. I guess I forgot about Ray. He was the only man for you, wasn't he?"

"He was the man, Dan."

Dan had promised to keep an eye on young Jim. Now he was thinking of the danger facing the youth. These thoughts pushed through him, giving him no rest. They pushed away his sleepiness.

His bartender came at nine. He unbuckled his apron and hung it up and went into the bright Spring sunshine. Unrest and indecision were running through him, giving his thoughts a hard coldness, bringing a scowl to his thick face. He went to the livery-barn and saddled his long-legged bay gelding.

**B**LUEJOINT grass was almost to the bay's knees. It waved deceptively across the basin. Soon the summer sun would scorch it and sink it down; this basin would be arid and dusty. Pot holes held water now; springs were still running; but when August came with its terrible heat, these would be dry. Then would Barr Stackpool need the water of Tumbleweed Springs and Bear Creek.

Circle K cattle would line up against the barbwire fences, bawling and tossing their long horns, their tongues swollen and slobbering. Circle K cattle would be

thirsty and gaunt. In a way, he could hardly blame Stackpool.

He knew that Jim had offered to sell Stackpool water in the dry months. And he knew that Stackpool had said he would either control Tumbleweed Springs or his cattle would die of thirst. Stackpool had bossed this basin too long to have a kid nester taunt him. . . . He had a fierce pride—a foolish, stubborn pride—the arrogance of the born cowman.

Big Dan rode the fifteen miles to Matt Jensen's farm. When he topped the ridge he saw the log house was in ashes; the barn had been burned down, too. Smoke was eddying lazily upward from the ruins. He drew rein, watching, fearing. He saw no signs of life around the burned-down homestead.

He rode through the cottonwoods. A rider came out of the brush now and he recognized Pete Redfern. Redfern sat an iron-gray stud.

"You're on Circle K property, Dan Reynolds."

Big Dan corrected, "Matt Jensen's property, Redfern."

Redfern loafed in saddle. "Matt Jensen done sold out to Barr Stackpool, Big Dan. They signed over the deed this mornin'. Matt done loaded up his material belongin's an' pulled out with his missus and two kids. Stackpool gave me orders to torch the buildin's to the ground. An' that I did."

Big Dan saw that the three strand barbed-wire fence had been cut. A few head of Circle K cattle were grazing on the short spring-wheat planted by Matt Jensen. His first thought was, "There's something crooked here," and his next was, "Now Jim Smith's all alone fightin' Stackpool."

He rode over to the ashes of the house and drew rein. Redfern had ridden beside him. He saw tracks; shod horses, boots, and then wagon tracks, running away from the fire. It didnt seem logical that Matt Jensen would sell and run. He told Redfern this.

"Maybe you figure we run him off, eh?"

Big Dan shrugged.

Redfern's tone showed his anger. "You hint at too much, Big Dan. Jus' pull your beak back, fella, an' let me an' Stackpool handle this nester of a Jim Smith. 'Tain't no scrap of your'n, it is? Jus'

'cause you happened to spark his mother years ago—"

Big Dan's hammerlock choked short the gunman's words. His arms clamped around Redfern's neck, the saloon-man braced himself in stirrups, horse tense against his weight. He dragged Redfern from saddle.

They went to the ground, with Big Dan trying to keep on his feet. Redfern pulled his cutter and Big Dan lost the hammerlock, grabbing the man's wrist. The gun rose, blasted harmlessly into the sky, and then Big Dan had the six-shooter. Redfern slammed his head into Big Dan's guts.

The pain was sharp. It cut through him, biting him; he smashed down with the Colt. He missed the gunman's head and the pistol hit Redfern on the collar-bone. He sat down, moaning and holding his shoulder, and Big Dan stepped back, breathing thickly.

"You'll keep your filthy mouth closed around me, Redfern!"

Redfern looked up. Anger had colored his eyes but now they were dull and without thought. They went over Big Dan Reynolds. Redfern said, "You've got the upper hand now; you can talk big. But there'll be another day."

Big Dan pulled the rifle from the boot on Redfern's kak. He swung up, carrying the rifle and six-shooter. He said, "I'll leave these down yonder along the crick by the crossin'." He rode away.

Redfern was right. He was in this because of Hattie, and because of Ray Smith; they were both dead. They had left a job unfinished because of death, and he was finishing it. There was no other way; that had to be. It was part of him, just as his blood and tissue were a part of him; there was no dodging that fact. They had left young Jim and, if Ray Smith hadn't married Hattie, then young Jim would have been his son. That was true. That was life.

He glanced back once. Redfern stood beside his horse and watched him. He remembered the hate he had seen scrawled across the gunman's loose, ugly face. Redfern was a gunhand, ignorant in his egotistical, centered way. His pride lay based on his prowess with a gun and Big Dan Reynolds had smashed that pride to one



side. Redfern would be out to kill him.

He came to the crossing, spray rising around his bronc's hoofs, and when he got to the far side he stuck Redfern's Winchester barrel down in the mud, letting the sixshooter drop in the water beside it. Redfern would find them clogged with mud and water. He smiled at that thought.

He found the wagon road and touched his pony with his spurs. It was four miles to Jim Smith's farm. When Big Dan rode into the yard Millie Smith was sweeping off the small front porch. Dan asked, "Where's Jim?" and she said, "Down along the north fence, I think."

Dan watched her. "You'll be comin' into town soon to stay close to Doc Wilson, won't you?"

"We're going in this evening, Dan."

Dan turned his bronc. "That's good." Her words stopped him. "Jim was in town all last night. This morning he had quite a bit of money he said he'd won at poker. Who did he win it from?"

"My house-man," Big Dan lied. He grinned and added, "I canned the house-man this mornin'. Another run of luck like that an' Jim will take over my outfit, Millie."

"I thought perhaps he had played with Stackpool and Redfern. They've been trying to get him into a poker game. I think they want to win this farm from him. I'm glad he didn't play with them."

"He didn't."

He rode to where Jim was punching in some postholes. He noticed that Jim packed his six-gun and also had a rifle leaning against a nearby tree. He said, "I didn't tell Millie this, but Stackpool bought out Matt Jensen today. He burned Jensen's building, tore down his fences."

Jim's lean face was thick with conflicting emotions. "That dirty dog!"

"Maybe he showed brains."

Jim grinned suddenly. "He might've, at that. But, brains or no brains, I'm not runnin'."

Big Dan felt the edge of the youth's pride. Day by day Jim got more like dead Ray Smith.

Jim told him he was taking Millie into town tonight. Big Dan said he would send out two of his housemen to watch the

farm; with Jim and Millie gone, Barr Stackpool and Pete Redfern might try to burn down the buildings.

"We'll wait until your men come out," Jim said.

**B**IG DAN reached Flat Rock by late afternoon. His bay was tired—he'd traveled around thirty some miles—and Big Dan was tired, too. He didn't sit a saddle much lately and the kak had peeled the bark off the inside of his huge legs. He had met one rider.

Stackpool had said, "Well, I bought out Matt Jensen. That water hole is mine, now."

Big Dan had reminded him that Jim Smith had offered to sell him water from Tumbleweed Springs. "He'll run a two inch pipe down to a trough outside his property, Stackpool. The watering-fee will be two-bits a head for the rest of the summer."

"My cattle drink free water, or none at all. That spring is mine by squatter's rights, Big Dan. I ran cattle on it for years. They drank there free. An' they'll drink free out of that spring again, an' it'll be around the edges of it, not out of a trough below this nester's fence. You can bet your last Canuck dollar on that!"

Again Big Dan Reynolds caught the brutality of this cowman. He was domineering; he was proud; his strength was naked and strong. He was thinking of this as he dismounted in Flat Rock's livery-stable.

He unsaddled the bay, watered him and let him roll in the corral; then he led him into a stall with native bluejoint and oats in the feed-box.

He got two of his bouncers to ride to Jim Smith's spread. They weren't anxious to take the job, he saw, and that brought a wry smile to his lips. Then he went upstairs to his bachelor quarters over the saloon and rolled across the bed, not bothering to take off anything but his boots; sleep came quickly. He was dead tired, and his youth had left him.

He was awakened by the sound of voices in the street. He hobbled to the window, stiff from his ride. Jim Smith's buggy was down there. A rear wheel was broken, the hardwood spokes snapped; he had tied a small cottonwood tree to it,

making a skid out of it. The horses were muddy.

"Where's Big Dan?" somebody asked.

Big Dan pulled on his boots, something knife-cold inside. Evidently the youth had had a run-away and with Millie in her condition—He almost ran down the stairs, forgetting his aches and pains.

He pushed through the crowd. "What happened, Jim?"

"Millie got some sudden pains. She got afraid and she wanted to start in for doc. I let her go—the team is old an' not wild. I stayed behind until your two bouncers came out."

He spoke in a low, savage tone. The two housemen had found her: the team had run-away, smashing the wheel; she was on the ground beside the road, the horses stopped because they had become entangled in the buckbrush. One man had straightened out the rig and the other had loped to the farm for Jim.

"Where's Millie now?"

Millie was in the doctor's office. Big Dan asked, face showing his fear, "How is she?"

"Doc's with her. I dunno, Big Dan."

Big Dan Reynolds stood there. Now he was adding this all up, and he was trying to find a total. "What scared the team? Did Millie tell you?"

"She said a jackrabbit scared them."

There was something missing here. Big Dan sensed that; did young Jim sense it, too? That team was well-broken. No rabbit would scare them. They had seen hundreds of jackrabbits. . . .

He went down the street to Doc's office. Mrs. Hudson was helping as a nurse. She met Big Dan in the lobby.

"Could I speak to Millie?"

She told him Millie was in the operating room. No, he couldn't see her. The doctor came out. Millie would be all right. The shock of the run-away, of course, had acted on her.

"I want to ask her one question."

Mrs. Hudson looked at the medico. He had known Big Dan for years. Finally he said, "For a minute, Dan."

Millie lay on the bed. She was undressed and he saw the tips of her bare shoulders from under the comforter. Her face was calm. He took her hand. It was warm. "Millie, I want you to answer one

question. And I want you to tell me straight. What scared that team?"

"A cottontail rabbit."

"Jim said a jackrabbit scared them."

She watched him, silently.

He said, almost softly, "Was it a rabbit? Are you telling me the truth? Or was it Pete Redfern, or Barr Stackpool?"

He had hit on the truth. Her face showed that. She watched him; he felt her eyes search him. Finally she said, murmuring, "Yes, it was them, Big Dan. They rode out of the brush, guns blasting. The team took the bits. Don't tell Jim. He'll go against them and they'll kill him."

He kissed her on the lips. "You be a brave girl, Millie."

"Doc says I'll be all right. The baby is due any time now, he says. And we hope for a boy. We have the name picked out. Dan Smith."

"Why Dan?"

"For you, rummy! If Jim's mom was alive, she'd want him named Dan. We've both agreed on that!"

Big Dan Reynolds swallowed hard. Doc said, "The time's up, Big Dan." The saloon-man went outside. The dusk was slipping down to enfold this pioneer cowtown. He didn't notice it, though. He was turmoil inside, and indecision was with him; out of this came one thought: Would he be alive within the hour? This sent fear pounding through his veins. But there was no other recourse. There was no one he could call to help him. He had to do it alone.

THEY had moved the broken buggy and team to the livery-barn. He didn't know where Jim Smith was. Two riders came down the street, confident in their saddle; he watched them step down and leave their broncs tied in front of the Curcingle Bar, across the dust. He watched them with great indifference.

They looked at him; he met their gazes. Stackpool was hard, the chips were down; he was ready. Redfern was lithe and quick and his gaze was without thought. They looked at him and then entered the saloon.

He went to his own saloon. He went behind the bar and poured three quick drinks. He put them in a row and then drank them, one after another; he drank



fast, and he felt the raw edge of the bitter whiskey.

"Killin' a snake inside of you, Big Dan?" his bartender asked.

"Two snakes," he said.

He went out the back door. He circled and crossed the street, the dusk warping around him. He came down the alley, kicked at a tin can, and stopped outside the backdoor of the Curcingle.

He stood. He thought, "That damn' whiskey didn't help a bit," and he smiled a little. He was afraid. Then he stepped inside.

Stackpool was at the bar, Redfern beside him. They didn't see him until he said, "Millie told me you two stampeded her team. You tried to kill her. You aimed to murder the girl. This has come to a head."

They saw him then. Stackpool said, very clearly, "The crazy fool," and he set down his drink. A globule of whiskey hung to the corner of his mouth. His tongue came out and took it away.

Redfern moved out, with Big Dan watching his every movement. The gunman was crouched and dangerous. He said, "I'll get him, Stackpool." He said, "He's been runnin' against me too much."

Stackpool said, "If you miss, I'll get him."

"I won't miss," Redfern breathed.

Boots were running on the plank walk outside. They came closer and louder; a man barged through the front doors. Stackpool had turned but Redfern had kept watching Big Dan Reynolds.

"Jim Smith," Stackpool said.

Jim Smith stopped and said, "I was just talkin' to a fellow here in town. He saw these two headin' over the hills after Millie's team had run away. They stampeded it, Big Dan!"

Dan said, "Get out, kid!"

"And let you carry my fight! Hell, no!"

There was a man who was shuffling his feet, tip-toeing toward a window. The others had all left. The only sound heard was the window rising, the man climbing through; outside his boots hit the ground, and they heard him run. His boot-sounds died and the guns lifted.

Redfern got in first shot. He was low, crouched; his gun winked a red blossom.

Big Dan was on one knee and Redfern's bullet hit his thigh. Big Dan had his gun out, and his palm was flashing down; he felt the hammer catch on his hand, felt the lift and pound of the gun.

Redfern was going ahead, sinking ahead; his gun was pointing down. And Big Dan, taking a chance the gunman was dying, swung his pistol on Barr Stackpool. Stackpool had his back to the bar, his gun hanging from his limp fingers. He slid down, the Colt falling.

"I made a mistake." The cowman spoke brokenly. "I should have bought that water— I should have—"

Stackpool's big head lopped, and he slid on his side. Big Dan looked at Jim Smith who stood with his face terrible and bleak. Big Dan asked, "Did he get you, son?"

"He shot wide."

Outside, men moved. They came into the saloon. One helped Big Dan up, and he hobbled to Jim Smith. He put his arm around the youth, who was still shaken and quiet.

"You'll help me, Jim?"

"Any time, Dan."

THEY went up the street, Jim Smith's strong right arm around Big Dan, with Big Dan hobbling; thus they came to the doctor's office. Mrs. Hudson let them in and they got Big Dan in a chair. Somebody stuck his head in the door with, "They're both goners, Big Dan."

"Get outa here, Webber."

Mrs. Hudson shut the door. "The doctor went to the Curcingle to see them. Now don't disturb Millie, please. She's asleep."

"She didn't hear the guns?" asked Jim. "No."

The woman got to work on Big Dan's leg. The wound was in the flesh, she said, and soon the doctor came. Big Dan leaned back, eyes closed, fighting his pain, fighting his thoughts.

So they would name him Dan Smith, huh? Then he asked, "But if it's a girl, Jim; what name then?"

"Hattie, after mom."

Big Dan kept his eyes closed. He hoped the baby was a girl. He would like to use the name, Hattie, again. It was the sweetest name in God's good world.

# The House of Mapuhi

## By Jack London

America's master story-teller creates a screaming super-hurricane and into its black maw plunges a helpless, naked human, with but one resource—a grim, fanatical will to live. Can either side win such a titanic struggle?

**D**ESPITE THE HEAVY CLUMSINESS of her lines, the *Aorai* handled easily in the light breeze, and her captain ran her well in before he hove to just outside the suck of the surf. The atoll of Hikueru lay low on the water, a circle of pounded coral sand a hundred yards wide, twenty miles in circumference, and from three to five feet above high-water mark.

On the bottom of the huge and glassy lagoon was much pearl shell, and from the deck of the schooner, across the slender ring of the atoll, the divers could be seen at work. But the lagoon had no entrance for even a trading schooner. With a favoring breeze cutters could win in through the tortuous and shallow channel, but the schooners lay off and on outside and sent in their small boats.

The *Aorai* swung out a boat smartly, into which sprang half a dozen brown-skinned sailors clad only in scarlet loin-cloths. They took the oars, while in the stern sheets, at the steering sweep, stood a young man garbed in the tropic white that marks the European.

But he was not all European. The golden strain of Polynesia betrayed itself in the sun-gilt of his fair skin and cast up golden sheens and lights through the glimmering blue of his eyes. Raoul he was, Alexandre Raoul, youngest son of Marie Raoul, the wealthy quarter-caste, who owned and managed half a dozen trading schooners similar to the *Aorai*.

Across an eddy just outside the entrance, and in and through and over a boiling tide rip, the boat fought its way to the mirrored calm of the lagoon. Young Raoul leaped out upon the white sand and shook hands with a tall native. The man's chest and shoulders were magnificent, but the stump of a right arm, beyond the flesh of which the age-whitened bone projected

several inches, attested the encounter with a shark that had put an end to his diving days and made him a fawner and an intriguer for small favors.

"Have you heard, Alec?" were his first words. "Mapuhi has found a pearl—such a pearl. Never was there one like it ever fished up in Hikueru, nor in all the Paumotus, nor in all the world. Buy it from him. He has it now. And remember that I told you first. He is a fool and you can get it cheap. Have you any tobacco?"

Straight up the beach to a shack under a pandanus tree Raoul headed. He was his mother's supercargo, and his business was to comb all the Paumotus for the wealth of copra, shell, and pearls they held.

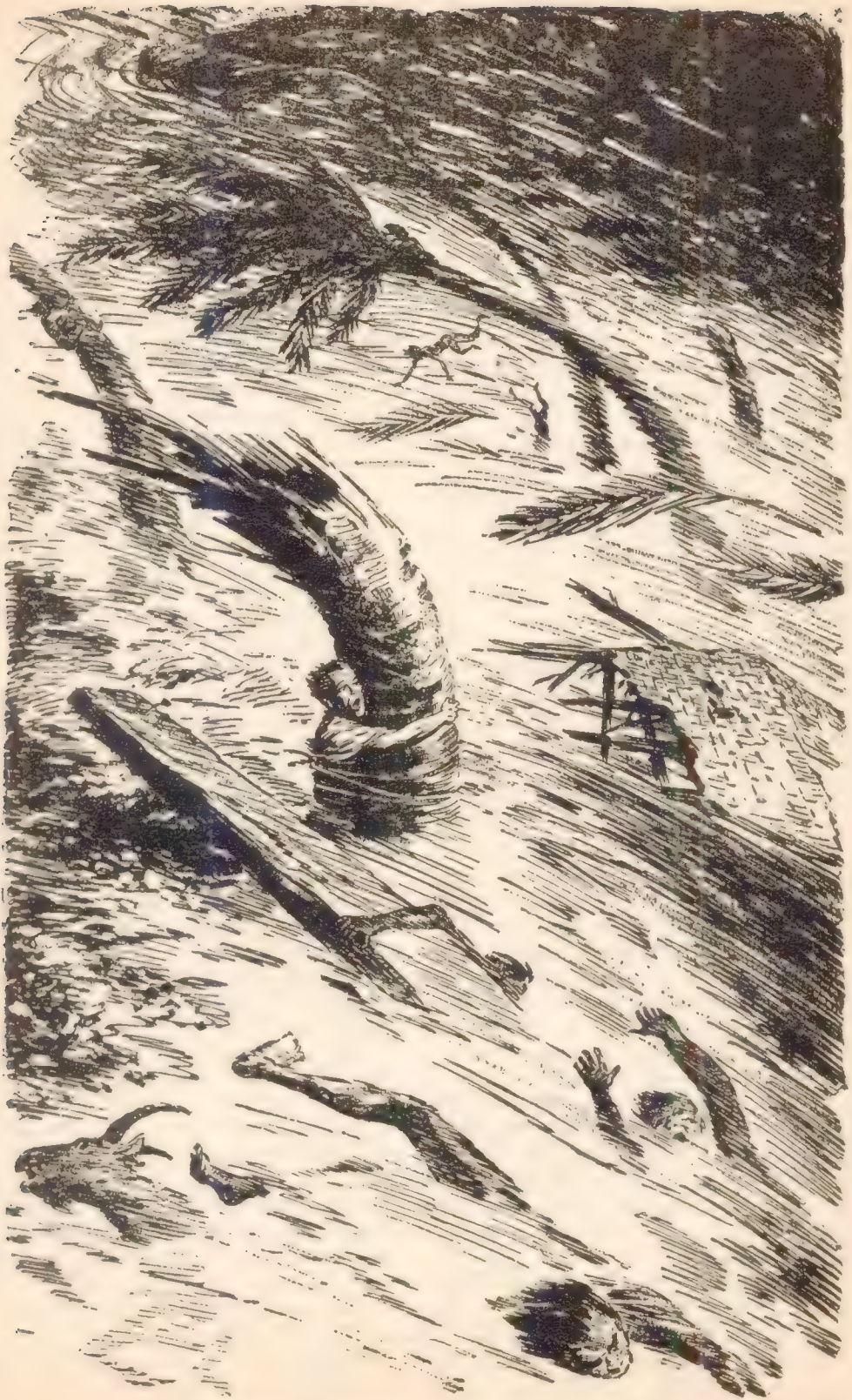
He was a young supercargo, it was his second voyage in such capacity, and he suffered much secret worry from his lack of experience in pricing pearls. But when Mapuhi exposed the pearl to his sight he managed to suppress the startle it gave him and to maintain a careless, commercial expression on his face.

For the pearl had struck him a blow. It was large as a pigeon egg, a perfect sphere, of a whiteness that reflected opalescent lights from all colors about it. It was alive. Never had he seen anything like it. When Mapuhi dropped it into his hand he was surprised by the weight of it. That showed that it was a good pearl. He examined it closely, through a pocket magnifying glass.

It was without flaw or blemish. The purity of it seemed almost to melt into the atmosphere out of his hand. In the shade it was softly luminous, gleaming like a tender moon. So translucently white was it that when he dropped it into a glass of water he had difficulty in finding it. So straight and swiftly had it sunk to the bottom that he knew its weight was excellent.

"Well, what do you want for it?" he





*Everything was happening quickly—too quickly!*



asked with a fine assumption of nonchalance.

"I want . . ." Mapuhi began, and behind him, framing his own dark face, the dark faces of two women and a girl nodded concurrence in what he wanted. Their heads were bent forward, they were animated by a suppressed eagerness, their eyes flashed avariciously.

"I want a house," Mapuhi went on. "It must have a roof of galvanized iron and an octagon drop clock. It must be six fathoms long with a porch all around. A big room must be in the center, with a round table in the middle of it and the octagon drop clock on the wall. There must be four bedrooms, two on each side of the big room, and in each bedroom must be an iron bed, two chairs, and a washstand. And back of the house must be a kitchen, a good kitchen, with pots and pans and a stove. And you must build the house on my island, which is Fakarava."

"Is that all?" Raoul asked incredulously.

"There must be a sewing machine," spoke up Tefara, Mapuhi's wife.

"Not forgetting the octagon drop clock," added Nauri, Mapuhi's mother.

"Yes, that is all," said Mapuhi.

YOUNG RAOUL laughed. He laughed long and heartily. But while he laughed he secretly performed problems in mental arithmetic. He had never built a house in his life, and his notions concerning house building were hazy. While he laughed, he calculated the cost of the voyage to Tahiti for materials, of the materials themselves, of the voyage back again to Fakarava, and the cost of landing the materials and of building the house. It would come to four thousand French dollars, allowing a margin for safety — four thousand French dollars were equivalent to twenty thousand francs. It was impossible. How was he to know the value of such a pearl? Twenty thousand francs was a lot of money—and of his mother's money at that.

"Mapuhi," he said, "you are a big fool. Set a money price."

But Mapuhi shook his head, and the three heads behind him shook in rhythm with his.

"I want the house," he said. "It must

be six fathoms long with a porch all around——"

"Yes, yes," Raoul interrupted. "I know all about your house, but it won't do. I'll give you a thousand Chili dollars."

The four heads chorused a silent negative.

"And a hundred Chili dollars in trade."

"I want the house," Mapuhi began again.

"What good will the house do you?" Raoul demanded. "The first hurricane that comes along will wash it away. You ought to know. Captain Raffy says it looks like a hurricane right now."

"Not on Fakarava," said Mapuhi. "The land is much higher there. On this island, yes. Any hurricane can sweep Hikuera. I will have the house on Fakarava. It must be six fathoms long with a porch all around——"

And Raoul listened again to the tale of the house. Several hours he spent in the endeavor to hammer the house obsession out of Mapuhi's mind; but Mapuhi's mother and wife, and Ngakura, Mapuhi's daughter, bolstered him in his resolve for the house. Through the open doorway, while he listened for the twentieth time to the detailed description of the house that was wanted, Raoul saw his schooner's second boat draw up on the beach. The sailors rested on the oars, advertising haste to be gone. The first mate of the *Aorai* sprang ashore, exchanged a word with the one-armed native, then hurried toward Raoul. The day grew suddenly dark, as a squall obscured the face of the sun. Across the lagoon Raoul could see approaching the ominous line of the puff of wind.

"Captain Raffy says you've got to get to hell outa here," was the mate's greeting. "If there's any shell we've got to run the risk of picking it up later on—so he says. The barometer's dropped to 29.70."

The gust of wind struck the pandanus tree overhead and tore through the palms beyond, flinging half a dozen ripe coconuts with heavy thuds to the ground. Then came the rain out of the distance, advancing with the roar of a gale of wind and causing the water of the lagoon to smoke in driven windrows. The sharp rattle of the first drops was on the leaves when Raoul sprang to his feet.

"A thousand Chili dollars, cash down,



Mapuhi," he said. "And two hundred Chili dollars in trade."

"I want a house——" the other began.

"Mapuhi!" Raoul yelled, in order to make himself heard. "You are a fool!"

He flung out of the house and, side by side with the mate, fought his way down the beach toward the boat. They could not see the boat. The tropic rain sheeted about them so that they could see only the beach under their feet and the spiteful little waves from the lagoon that snapped and bit at the sand. A figure appeared through the deluge. It was Huru-Huru, the man with the one arm.

"Did you get the pearl?" he yelled in Raoul's ear.

"Mapuhi is a fool!" was the answering yell, and the next moment they were lost to each other in the descending water.

Half an hour later Huru-Huru, watching from the seaward side of the atoll, saw the two boats hoisted in and the *Aorai* pointing her nose out to sea. And near her, just come in from the sea on the wings of the squall, he saw another schooner hove to and dropping a boat into the water. He knew her. It was the *Orohena*, owned by Toriki, the half-caste trader, who served as his own supercargo and who doubtlessly was even then in the stern sheets of the boat. Huru-Huru chuckled. He knew that Mapuhi owed Toriki for trade goods advanced the year before.

## II

THE SQUALL HAD PASSED. The hot sun was blazing down, and the lagoon was once more a mirror. But the air was sticky like mucilage, and the weight of it seemed to burden the lungs and make breathing difficult.

"Have you heard the news, Toriki?" Huru-Huru asked. "Mapuhi has found a pearl. Never was there a pearl like it ever fished up in Hikueru, nor anywhere in the Paumotus, nor anywhere in all the world. Mapuhi is a fool. Besides, he owes you money. Remember that I told you first. Have you any tobacco?"

And to the grass shack of Mapuhi went Toriki. He was a masterful man, withal a fairly stupid one. Carelessly he glanced at the wonderful pearl—glanced for a mo-

ment only; and carelessly he dropped it into his pocket.

"You are lucky," he said. "It is a nice pearl. I will give you credit on the books."

"I want a house," Mapuhi began in consternation. "It must be six fathoms——"

"Six fathoms your grandmother!" was the trader's retort. "You want to pay up your debts, that's what you want. You owed me twelve hundred dollars Chili. Very well; you owe them no longer. The amount is squared. Besides, I will give you credit for two hundred Chili. If, when I get to Tahiti, the pearl sells well, I will give you credit for another hundred—that will make three hundred. But mind, only if the pearl sells well. I may even lose money on it."

Mapuhi folded his arms in sorrow and sat with bowed head. He had been robbed of his pearl. In place of the house he had paid a debt. There was nothing to show for the pearl.

"You are a fool," said Tefara.

"You are a fool," said Nauri, his mother. "Why did you let the pearl into his hand?"

"What was I to do?" Mapuhi protested. "I owed him the money. He knew I had the pearl. You heard him yourself ask to see it. I had not told him. He knew. Somebody else told him. And I owed him the money."

"Mapuhi is a fool," mimicked Ngakura.

She was twelve years old and did not know any better. Mapuhi relieved his feelings by sending her reeling from a box on the ear; while Tefara and Nauri burst into tears and continued to upbraid him after the manner of women.

Huru-Huru, watching on the beach, saw a third schooner that he knew heave to outside the entrance and drop a boat. It was the *Hira*, well named, for she was owned by Levy, the German Jew, the greatest pearl buyer of them all, and, as was well known, Hira was the Tahitian god of fishermen and thieves.

"Have you heard the news?" Huru-Huru asked as Levy, a fat man with massive asymmetrical features, stepped out upon the beach. "Mapuhi has found a pearl. There was never a pearl like it in Hikueru, in all the Paumotus, in all the world. Mapuhi is a fool. He has sold it to Toriki for fourteen hundred Chili—I

listened outside and heard. Toriki is likewise a fool. You can buy it from him cheap. Remember that I told you first. Have you any tobacco?"

"Where is Toriki?"

"In the house of Captain Lynch, drinking absinthe. He has been there an hour."

And while Levy and Toriki drank absinthe and chattered over the pearl, Huru-Huru listened and heard the stupendous price of twenty-five thousand francs agreed upon.

IT WAS at this time that both the *Orohena* and the *Hira*, running in close to the shore, began firing guns and signaling frantically. The three men stepped outside in time to see the two schooners go hastily about and head offshore, dropping mainsails and flying jibs on the run in the teeth of the squall that heeled them far over on the whitened water. Then the rain blotted them out.

"They'll be back after it's over," said Toriki. "We'd better be getting out of here."

"I reckon the glass has fallen some more," said Captain Lynch.

He was a white-bearded sea captain, too old for service, who had learned that the only way to live on comfortable terms with his asthma was on Hikueru. He went inside to look at the barometer.

"Great God!" they heard him exclaim, and rushed in to join him at staring at a dial, which marked 29.20.

Again they came out, this time anxiously to consult sea and sky. The squall had cleared away, but the sky remained overcast. The two schooners, under all sail and joined by a third, could be seen making back. A veer in the wind induced them to slack off sheets, and five minutes afterward a sudden veer from the opposite quarter caught all three schooners aback, and those on shore could see the boom tackles being slacked away or cast off on the jump. The sound of the turf was loud, hollow, and menacing, and a heavy swell was setting in. A terrible sheet of lightning burst before their eyes, illuminating the dark day, and the thunder rolled wildly about them.

Toriki and Levy broke into a run for their boats, the latter ambling along like a panic-stricken hippopotamus. As their two

boats swept out the entrance they passed the boat of the *Aorai* coming in. In the stern sheets, encouraging the rowers, was Raoul. Unable to shake the vision of the pearl from his mind, he was returning to accept Mapuhi's price of a house.

He landed on the beach in the midst of a driving thundersquall that was so dense that he collided with Huru-Huru before he saw them.

"Too late," yelled Huru-Huru. "Mapuhi sold it to Toriki for fourteen hundred Chili, and Toriki sold it to Levy for twenty-five thousand francs. And Levy will sell it in France for a hundred thousand francs. Have you any tobacco?"

Raoul felt relieved. His troubles about the pearl were over. He need not worry any more, even if he had not got the pearl. But he did not believe Huru-Huru. Mapuhi might well have sold it for fourteen hundred Chili but that Levy, who knew pearls, should have paid twenty-five thousand francs was too wide a stretch. Raoul decided to interview Captain Lynch on the subject, but when he arrived at that ancient mariner's house, he found him looking wide-eyed at the barometer.

"What do you read it?" Captain Lynch asked anxiously, rubbing his spectacles and staring again at the instrument.

"Twenty-nine ten," said Raoul. "I have never seen it so low before."

"I should say not!" snorted the captain. "Fifty years boy and man on all the seas, and I've never seen it go down to that. Listen!"

They stood for a moment, while the surf rumbled and shook the house. Then they went outside. The squall had passed. They could see the *Aorai* lying becalmed a mile away and pitching and tossing madly in the tremendous seas that rolled in stately procession down out of the northeast and flung themselves furiously upon the coral shore. One of the sailors from the boat pointed at the mouth of the passage and shook his head. Raoul looked and saw a white anarchy of foam and surge.

"I guess I'll stay with you tonight, Captain," he said; then turned to the sailor and told him to haul the boat out and to find shelter for himself and fellows.

"Twenty-nine flat," Captain Lynch reported, coming out from another look at



the barometer, a chair in his hand.

He sat down and stared at the spectacle of the sea. The sun came out, increasing the sultriness of the day, while the dead calm still held. The seas continued to increase in magnitude.

"What makes that sea is what gets me," Raoul muttered petulantly. "There is no wind, yet look at it, look at that fellow there!"

**M**ILES IN LENGTH, carrying tens of thousands of tons in weight, its impact shook the frail atoll like an earthquake. Captain Lynch was startled.

"Gracious!" he exclaimed, half rising from his chair, then sinking back.

"But there is no wind," Raoul persisted. "I could understand it if there was wind along with it."

"You'll get the wind soon enough without worryin' for it," was the grim reply.

The two men sat on in silence. The sweat stood out on their skin in myriads of tiny drops that ran together, forming blotches of moisture, which in turn coalesced into rivulets that dripped to the ground. They panted for breath, the old man's efforts being especially painful. A sea swept up the beach, licking around the trunks of the coconuts and subsiding almost at their feet.

"Way past high-water mark," Captain Lynch remarked; "and I've been here eleven years." He looked at his watch. "It is three o'clock."

A man and woman, at their heels a motley following of brats and curs, trailed disconsolately by. They came to a halt beyond the house and, after much irresolution, sat down in the sand. A few minutes later another family trailed in from the opposite direction, the men and women carrying a heterogeneous assortment of possessions. And soon several hundred persons of all ages and sexes were congregated about the captain's dwelling. He called to one new arrival, a woman with a nursing babe in her arms, and in answer received the information that her house had just been swept into the lagoon.

This was the highest spot of land in miles, and already, in many places on either hand, the great seas were making a clean breach of the slender ring of the atoll and surging into the lagoon. Twenty

miles around stretched the ring of the atoll, and in no place was it more than fifty fathoms wide. It was the height of the diving season, and from all the islands around, even as far as Tahiti, the natives had gathered.

"There are twelve hundred men, women, and children here," said Captain Lynch. "I wonder how many will be here tomorrow morning."

"But why don't it blow? That's what I want to know," Raoul demanded.

"Don't worry, young man, don't worry; you'll get your troubles fast enough."

Even as Captain Lynch spoke a great watery mass smote the atoll. The sea water churned about them three inches deep under their chairs. A low wail of fear went up from the many women. The children, with clasped hands, stared at the immense rollers and cried piteously. Chickens and cats, wading perturbedly in the water, as by common consent, with flight and scramble took refuge on the roof of the captain's house. A Paumotan, with a litter of newborn puppies in a basket, climbed into a coconut tree and twenty feet above the ground made the basket fast. The mother floundered about in the water beneath, whining and yelping.

And still the sun shone brightly and the dead calm continued. They sat and watched the seas and the insane pitching of the *Aorai*. Captain Lynch gazed at the huge mountains of water sweeping in until he could gaze no more. He covered his face with his hands to shut out the sight; then went into the house.

"Twenty-eight sixty," he said quietly when he returned.

In his arm was a coil of small rope. He cut it into two-fathom lengths, giving one to Raoul and, retaining one for himself, distributed the remainder among the women with the advice to pick out a tree and climb.

A light air began to blow out of the northeast, and the fan of it on his cheek seemed to cheer Raoul up. He could see the *Aorai* trimming her sheets and heading offshore, and he regretted that he was not on her. She would get away at any rate, but as for the atoll . . . A sea breached across, almost sweeping him off his feet, and he selected a tree. Then he remembered the barometer and ran back

to the house. He encountered Captain Lynch on the same errand and together they went in.

"Twenty-eight twenty," said the old mariner. "It's going to be fair hell around here—what was that?"

### III

THE AIR seemed filled with the rush of something. The house quivered and vibrated, and they heard the thrumming of a mighty note of sound. The windows rattled. Two panes crashed; a draft of wind tore in, striking them and making them stagger. The door opposite banged shut, shattering the latch. The white doorknob crumpled in fragments to the floor. The room's walls bulged like a gas balloon in the process of sudden inflation.

Then came a new sound like the rattle of musketry, as the spray from a sea struck the wall of the house. Captain Lynch looked at his watch. It was four o'clock. He put on a coat of pilot cloth, unhooked the barometer, and stowed it away in a capacious pocket. Again a sea struck the house, with a heavy thud, and the light building tilted, twisted quarter around on its foundation, and sank down, its floor at an angle of ten degrees.

Raoul went out first. The wind caught him and whirled him away. He noted that it had hauled around to the east. With a great effort he threw himself on the sand, crouching and holding his own. Captain Lynch, driven like a wisp of straw, sprawled over him. Two of the *Aorai's* sailors, leaving a coconut tree to which they had been clinging, came to their aid, leaning against the wind at impossible angles and fighting and clawing every inch of the way.

The old man's joints were stiff and he could not climb, so the sailors, by means of short ends of rope tied together, hoisted him up the trunk, a few feet at a time, till they could make him fast, at the top of the tree, fifty feet from the ground. Raoul passed his length of rope around the base of an adjacent tree and stood looking on.

The wind was frightful. He had never dreamed it could blow so hard. A sea breached across the atoll, wetting him to

the knees ere it subsided into the lagoon. The sun had disappeared, and a lead-colored twilight settled down. A few drops of rain, driving horizontally, struck him. The impact was like that of leaden pellets. A splash of salt spray struck his face. It was like the slap of a man's hand. His cheeks stung, and involuntary tears of pain were in his smarting eyes.

Several hundred natives had taken to the trees, and he could have laughed at the bunches of human fruit clustering the tops. Then, being Tahitian-born, he doubled his body at the waist, clasped the trunk of his tree with his hands, pressed the soles of his feet against the near surface of the trunk, and began to walk up the tree. At the top he found two women, two children, and a man. One little girl clasped a house cat in her arms.

From his eyrie he waved his hand to Captain Lynch, and that doughty patriarch waved back. Raoul was appalled at the sky. It had approached much nearer—in fact it seemed just over his head; and it had turned from lead to black. Many people were still on the ground grouped about the bases of the trees and holding on. Several such clusters were praying, and in one the Mormon missionary was exhorting.

A weird sound, rhythmical, faint as the faintest chirp of a far cricket, enduring but for a moment, but in that moment suggesting to him vaguely the thought of heaven and celestial music, came to his ear. He glanced about him and saw, at the base of another tree, a large cluster of people holding on by ropes and by one another. He could see their faces working and their lips moving in unison. No sound came to him, but he knew that they were singing hymns.

STILL the wind continued to blow harder. By no conscious process could he measure it, for it had long since passed beyond all his experience of wind; but he knew somehow, nevertheless, that it was blowing harder. Not far away a tree was uprooted, flinging its load of human beings to the ground. A sea washed across the strip of sand, and they were gone.

Things were happening quickly. He saw a brown shoulder and a black head silhouetted against the churning white of the



lagoon. The next instant that, too, had vanished. Other trees were going, falling and crisscrossing like matches. He was amazed at the power of the wind. His own tree was swaying perilously, one woman was wailing and clutching the little girl, who in turn still hung on to the cat.

The man, holding the other child, touched Raoul's arm and pointed. He looked and saw the Mormon church careening drunkenly a hundred feet away. It had been torn from its foundations, and wind and sea were heaving and shoving it toward the lagoon. A frightful wall of water caught it, tilted it, and flung it against half a dozen coconut trees. The bunches of human fruit fell like ripe coconuts. The subsiding wave showed them on the ground, some lying motionless, others squirming and writhing. They reminded him strangely of ants. He was not shocked. He had risen above horror.

Quite as a matter of course he noted the succeeding wave sweep the sand clean of the human wreckage. A third wave, more colossal than any he had yet seen, hurled the church into the lagoon, where it floated off into the obscurity to leeward, half submerged, reminding him for all the world of a Noah's ark.

He looked for Captain Lynch's house and was surprised to find it gone. Things certainly were happening quickly. He noticed that many of the people in the trees that still held had descended to the ground. The wind had yet again increased. His own tree showed that. It no longer swayed or bent over and back. Instead it remained practically stationary, curved in a rigid angle from the wind and merely vibrating. But the vibration was sickening. It was like that of a tuning fork or the tongue of a jew's-harp. It was the rapidity of the vibration that made it so bad. Even though its roots held, it could not stand the strain for long. Something would have to break.

Ah, there was one that had gone. He had not seen it go, but there it stood, the remnant, broken off halfway up the trunk. One did not know what happened unless he saw it. The mere crashing of trees and wails of human despair occupied no place in that mighty volume of sound. He chanced to be looking in Captain Lynch's direction when it happened. He saw the

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trunk of the tree, halfway up, splinter and part without noise. The head of the tree, with three sailors of the *Aorai* and the old captain, sailed off over the lagoon. It did not fall to the ground but drove through the air like a piece of chaff. For a hundred yards he followed its flight, when it struck the water. He strained his eyes and was sure that he saw Captain Lynch wave farewell.

**R**AOUL did not wait for anything more. He touched the native and made signs to descend to the ground. The man was willing, but his women were paralyzed from terror, and he elected to remain with them.

Raoul passed his rope around the tree and slid down. A rush of salt water went over his head. He held his breath and clung desperately to the rope. The water subsided, and in the shelter of the trunk he breathed once more. He fastened the rope more securely, and then was put under by another sea. One of the women slid down and joined him, the native remaining by the other woman, the two children, and the cat.

The supercargo had noticed how the groups clinging at the bases of the other trees continually diminished. Now he saw the process work out alongside him. It

required all his strength to hold on, and the woman who had joined him was growing weaker. Each time he emerged from a sea he was surprised to find himself still there, and next, surprised to find the woman still there.

At last he emerged to find himself alone. He looked up. The top of the tree had gone as well. At half its original height a splintered end vibrated. He was safe. The roots still held, while the tree had been shorn of its windage. He began to climb up. He was so weak that he went slowly, and sea after sea caught him before he was above them. Then he tied himself to the trunk and stiffened his soul to face the night and he knew not what.

He felt very lonely in the darkness. At times it seemed to him that it was the end of the world and that he was the last one left alive. Still the wind increased. Hour after hour it increased. By what he calculated was eleven o'clock the wind had become unbelievable. It was a horrible, monstrous thing, a screaming fury, a wall that smote and passed on but that continued to smite and pass on—a wall without end. It seemed to him that he had become light and ethereal; that it was he that was in motion; that he was being driven with inconceivable velocity through unending solidness. The wind was no longer air in motion. It had become substantial as water or quicksilver. He had a feeling that he could reach into it and tear it out in chunks as one might do with the meat in the carcass of a steer; that he could seize hold of the wind and hang on to it as a man might hang on to the face of a cliff.

The wind strangled him. He could not face it and breathe, for it rushed in through his mouth and nostrils, distending his lungs like bladders. At such moments it seemed to him that his body was being packed and swollen with solid earth. Only by pressing his lips to the trunk of the tree could he breathe. Also the ceaseless impact of the wind exhausted him. Body and brain became wearied. He no longer observed, no longer thought, and was but semiconscious.

One idea constituted his consciousness: *So this was a hurricane*. That one idea persisted irregularly. It was like a feeble flame that flickered occasionally. From a

state of stupor he would return to it: *So this was a hurricane*. Then he would go off into another stupor.

THE height of the hurricane endured from eleven at night till three in the morning, and it was at eleven that the tree in which clung Mapuhi and his women snapped off. Mapuhi rose to the surface of the lagoon, still clutching his daughter Ngakura. Only a South Sea islander could have lived in such a driving smother. The pandanus tree, to which he attached himself, turned over and over in the froth and churn; and it was only by holding on at times and waiting, and at other times shifting his grips rapidly, that he was able to get his head and Ngakura's to the surface at intervals sufficiently near together to keep the breath in them. But the air was mostly water, what with flying spray and sheeted rain that poured along at right angles to the perpendicular.

It was ten miles across the lagoon to the farther ring of sand. Here tossing tree trunks, timbers, wrecks of cutters, and wreckage of houses killed nine out of ten of the miserable beings who survived the passage of the lagoon. Half drowned, exhausted, they were hurled into this mad mortar of the elements and battered into formless flesh. But Mapuhi was fortunate. His chance was the one in ten; it fell to him by the freakage of fate. He emerged upon the sand, bleeding from a score of wounds. Ngakura's left arm was broken; the fingers of her right hand were crushed; and cheek and forehead were laid open to the bone. He clutched a tree that yet stood, and clung on, holding the girl and sobbing for air, while the waters of the lagoon washed by knee-high and at times waist-high.

At three in the morning the backbone of the hurricane broke. By five no more than a stiff breeze was blowing. And by six it was dead calm and the sun was shining. The sea had gone down. On the yet restless edge of the lagoon Mapuhi saw the broken bodies of those that had failed in the landing. Undoubtedly Tefara and Nauri were among them. He went along the beach examining them, and came upon his wife, lying half in and half out of the water. He sat down and wept, making harsh animal noises after the manner



of primitive grief. Then she stirred uneasily and groaned. He looked more closely. Not only was she alive, but she was uninjured. She was merely sleeping. Hers also had been the one chance in ten.

Of the twelve hundred alive the night before but three hundred remained. The Mormon missionary and a gendarme made the census. The lagoon was cluttered with corpses. Not a house nor a hut was standing. In the whole atoll not two stones remained one upon another. One in fifty of the coconut palms still stood, and they were wrecks, while on not one of them remained a single nut.

There was no fresh water. The shallow wells that caught the surface seepage of the rain were filled with salt. Out of the lagoon a few soaked bags of flour were recovered. The survivors cut the hearts out of the fallen coconut trees and ate them. Here and there they crawled into tiny hutches, made by hollowing out the sand and covering over with fragments of metal roofing.

The missionary made a crude still, but he could not distill water for three hundred persons. But the end of the second day Raoul, taking a bath in the lagoon, discovered that his thirst was somewhat relieved. He cried out the news, and thereupon three hundred men, women, and children could have been seen, standing up to their necks in the lagoon and trying to drink water in through their skins. Their dead floated about them, or were stepped upon where they still lay upon the bottom. On the third day the people buried their dead and sat down to wait for the rescue steamers.

#### IV

**I**N THE MEANTIME Nauri, torn from her family by the hurricane, had been swept away on an adventure of her own. Clinging to a rough plank that wounded and bruised her and that filled her body with splinters, she was thrown clear over the atoll and carried away to sea. Here, under the amazing buffets of mountains of water, she lost her plank.

She was an old woman nearly sixty; but she was Paumotan-born, and she had never been out of sight of the sea in her life. Swimming in the darkness, strang-

ling, suffocating, fighting for air, she was struck a heavy blow on the shoulder by a coconut. On the instant her plan was formed, and she seized the nut. In the next hour she captured seven more. Tied together, they formed a life buoy that preserved her life while at the same time it threatened to pound her to jelly. She was a fat woman, and she bruised easily; but she had had experience of hurricanes, and while she prayed to her shark god for protection from sharks, she waited for the wind to break.

But at three o'clock she was in such a stupor that she did not know. Nor did she know at six o'clock when the dead calm settled down. She was shocked into consciousness when she was thrown upon the sand. She dug in with raw and bleeding hands and feet and clawed against the backwash until she was beyond the reach of the waves.

She knew where she was. This land could be no other than the tiny islet of Takokota. It had no lagoon. No one lived upon it. Hikueru was fifteen miles away. She could not see Hikueru, but she knew that it lay to the south. The days went by, and she lived on the coconuts that had kept her afloat. They supplied her with drinking water and with food. But she did not drink all she wanted nor eat all she wanted. Rescue was problematical. She saw the smoke of the rescue steamers on the horizon, but what steamer could be expected to come to lonely uninhabited Takokota?

From the first she was tormented by corpses. The sea persisted in flinging them upon her bit of sand, and she persisted, until her strength failed, in thrusting them back into the sea where the sharks tore at them and devoured them. When her strength failed, the bodies festooned her beach with ghastly horror, and she withdrew from them as far as she could, which was not far.

By the tenth day her last coconut was gone, and she was shriveling from thirst. She dragged herself along the sand, looking for coconuts. It was strange that so many bodies floated up, and no nuts. Surely there were more coconuts afloat than dead men! She gave up at last and lay exhausted. The end had come. Nothing remained but to wait for death.

COMING out of a stupor, she became slowly aware that she was gazing at a patch of sandy-red hair on the head of a corpse. The sea flung the body toward her, then drew it back. It turned over, and she saw that it had no face. Yet there was something familiar about that patch of sandy-red hair. An hour passed. She did not exert herself to make the identification. She was waiting to die, and it mattered little to her what man that thing of horror once might have been.

But at the end of the hour she sat up slowly and stared at the corpse. An unusually large wave had thrown it beyond the reach of the lesser waves. Yes, she was right; that patch of red hair could belong to but one man in the Paumotus. It was Levy, the German Jew, the man who had bought the pearl and carried it away on the *Hira*. Well, one thing was evident: the *Hira* had been lost. The pearl buyer's god of fishermen and thieves had gone back on him.

She crawled down to the dead man. His shirt had been torn away, and she could see the leather money belt about his waist. She held her breath and tugged at the buckles. They gave easier than she had expected, and she crawled hurriedly away across the sand, dragging the belt after her. Pocket after pocket she unbuckled in the belt and found empty. Where could he have put it? In the last pocket of all she found it, the first and only pearl he had bought on the voyage.

She crawled a few feet farther, to escape the pestilence of the belt, and examined the pearl. It was the one Mapuhi had found and been robbed of by Toriki. She weighed it in her hand and rolled it back and forth caressingly. But in it she saw no intrinsic beauty.

What she did see was the house Mapuhi and Tefara and she had builded so carefully in their minds. Each time she looked at the pearl she saw the house in all its details, including the octagon drop clock on the wall. That was something to live for.

She tore a strip from her *ahu* and tied the pearl securely about her neck. Then she went on along the beach, panting and groaning, but resolutely seeking for coconuts. Quickly she found one and, as she glanced around, a second. She broke one,

drinking its water, which was mildewy, and eating the last particle of the meat. A little later she found a shattered dugout. Its outrigger was gone, but she was hopeful, and before the day was out she found the outrigger.

Every find was an augury. The pearl was a talisman. Late in the afternoon she saw a wooden box floating low in the water. When she dragged it out on the beach its contents rattled, and inside she found ten tins of salmon. She opened one by hammering it on the canoe. When a leak was started, she drained the tin. After that she spent several hours in extracting the salmon, hammering and squeezing it out a morsel at a time.

Eight days longer she waited for rescue. In the meantime she fastened the outrigger back on the canoe, using for lashings all the coconut fiber she could find, and also what remained of her *ahu*. The canoe was badly cracked, and she could not make it watertight; but a calabash made from a coconut she stored on board for a bailer. She was hard put for a paddle. With a piece of tin she sawed off all her hair close to the scalp. Out of the hair she braided a cord; and by means of the cord she lashed a three-foot piece of broom handle to a board from the salmon case. She gnawed wedges with her teeth and with them wedged the lashing.

On the eighteenth day, at midnight, she launched the canoe through the surf and started back for Hikueru. She was an old woman. Hardship had stripped her fat from her till scarcely more than bones and skin and a few stringy muscles remained. The canoe was large and should have been paddled by three strong men. But she did it alone, with a makeshift paddle. Also the canoe leaked badly, and one third of her time was devoted to bailing.

BY clear daylight she looked vainly for Hikueru. Astern, Takokota had sunk beneath the sea rim. The sun blazed down on her nakedness, compelling her body to surrender its moisture. Two tins of salmon were left, and in the course of the day she battered holes in them and drained the liquid. She had no time to waste in extracting the meat. A current was setting to the westward; she made westing whether she made southing or not.



In the early afternoon, standing upright in the canoe, she sighted Hikueru. Its wealth of coconut palms was gone. Only here and there, at wide intervals, could she see the ragged remnants of trees. The sight cheered her. She was nearer than she had thought. The current was setting her to the westward. She bore up against it and paddled on. The wedges in the paddle lashing worked loose, and she lost much time, at frequent intervals, in driving them tight. Then there was the bailing. One hour in three she had to cease paddling in order to bail. And all the time she drifted to the westward.

By sunset Hikueru bore southeast from her, three miles away. There was a full moon, and by eight o'clock the land was due east and two miles away. She struggled on for another hour, but the land was as far away as ever. She was in the main grip of the current; the canoe was too large; the paddle was too inadequate; and too much of her time and strength was wasted in bailing. Besides, she was very weak and growing weaker. Despite her efforts, the canoe was drifting off to the westward.

She breathed a prayer to her shark god, slipped over the side, and began to swim. She was actually refreshed by the water, and quickly left the canoe astern. At the end of an hour the land was perceptibly nearer. Then came her fright. Right before her eyes, not twenty feet away, a large fin cut the water. She swam steadily toward it, and slowly it glided away, curving off toward the right and circling around her. She kept her eyes on the fin and swam on. When the fin disappeared she lay face downward on the water and watched. When the fin reappeared she resumed her swimming. The monster was lazy—she could see that. Without doubt he had been well fed since the hurricane. Had he been very hungry, she knew he would not have hesitated from making a dash for her. He was fifteen feet long, and one bite, she knew, could cut her in half.

But she did not have any time to waste on him. Whether she swam or not, the current drew away from the land just the same. A half hour went by, and the shark began to grow bolder. Seeing no harm in her, he drew closer, in narrowing circles,

cocking his eyes at her impudently as he slid past. Sooner or later, she knew well enough, he would get up sufficient courage to dash at her.

She resolved to play first. It was a desperate act she meditated. She was an old woman, alone in the sea and weak from starvation and hardship; and yet she, in the face of this sea tiger, must anticipate his dash by herself dashing at him. She swam on, waiting her chance. At last he passed languidly by, barely eight feet away. She rushed at him suddenly, feigning that she was attacking him. He gave a wild flirt of his tail as he fled away, and his sandpaper hide, striking her, took off her skin from elbow to shoulder. He swam rapidly, in a widening circle, and at last disappeared.

## V

IN THE HOLE IN THE SAND, covered over by fragments of metal roofing, Mapuhi and Tefara lay disputing. "If you had done as I said," charged Tefara for the thousandth time, "and hidden the pearl and told no one, you would have it now."

"But Huru-Huru was with me when I opened the shell—have I not told you so times and times and times without end?"

"And now we shall have no house. Raoul told me today that if you had not sold the pearl to Toriki—"

"I did not sell it. Toriki robbed me."

"—that if you had not sold the pearl, he would give you five thousand French dollars, which is ten thousand Chili."

"He has been talking to his mother," Mapuhi explained. "She has an eye for a pearl."

"And now the pearl is lost," Tefara complained.

"It paid my debt with Toriki. That is twelve hundred I have made, anyway."

"Toriki is dead," she cried. "They have heard no word of his schooner. She was lost along with the *Aorai* and the *Hira*. Will Toriki pay you the three hundred credit he promised? No, because Toriki is dead. And had you found no pearl, would you today owe Toriki the twelve hundred? No, because Toriki is dead, and you cannot pay dead men."

"But Levy did not pay Toriki," Mapuhi

said. "He gave him a piece of paper that was good for the money in Papeete; and now Levy is dead and cannot pay; and Toriki is dead and the paper lost with him, and the pearl is lost with Levy. You are right, Tefara. I have lost the pearl, and got nothing for it. Now let us sleep."

He held up his hand suddenly and listened. From without came a noise, as of one who breathed heavily and with pain. A hand fumbled against the mat that served for a door.

"Who is there?" Mapuhi cried.

"Nauri," came the answer. "Can you tell me where is my son Mapuhi?"

Tefara screamed and gripped her husband's arm.

"A ghost!" she chattered. "A ghost!"

Mapuhi's face was a ghastly yellow. He clung weakly to his wife.

"Good woman," he said in faltering tones, striving to disguise his voice, "I know your son well. He is living on the east side of the lagoon."

From without came the sound of a sigh. Mapuhi began to feel elated. He had fooled the ghost.

"But where do you come from, old woman?" he asked.

"From the sea," was the dejected answer.

"I knew it! I knew it!" screamed Tefara, rocking to and fro.

"Since when has Tefara bedded in a strange house?" came Nauri's voice through the matting.

Mapuhi looked fear and reproach at his wife. It was her voice that had betrayed them.

"And since when has Mapuhi, my son, denied his old mother?" the voice went on.

"No, no, I have not—Mapuhi has not denied you," he cried. "I am not Mapuhi. He is on the east end of the lagoon, I tell you."

Ngakura sat up in bed and began to cry. The matting started to shake.

"What are you doing?" Mapuhi demanded.

"I am coming in," said the voice of Nauri.

ONE end of the matting lifted. Tefara tried to dive under the blankets, but Mapuhi held on to her. He had to hold on to something. Together, struggling with each other, with shivering bodies and chattering teeth, they gazed with protruding eyes at the lifting mat. They saw Nauri, dripping with sea water, without her ahu, creep in. They rolled over backward from her and fought for Ngakura's blanket with which to cover their heads.

"You might give your old mother a drink of water," the ghost said plaintively.

"Give her a drink of water," Tefara commanded in a shaking voice.

"Give her a drink of water," Mapuhi passed on the command to Ngakura.

And together they kicked out Ngakura from under the blanket. A minute later, peeping, Mapuhi saw the ghost drinking. When it reached out a shaking hand and laid it on his, he felt the weight of it and was convinced that it was no ghost. Then he emerged, dragging Tefara after him, and in a few minutes all were listening to Nauri's tale. When she dropped the pearl into Tefara's hand, the latter said, "In the morning, you will sell the pearl to Raoul for five thousand French."

"The house?" objected Nauri.

"He will build the house," Tefara answered. "He says it will cost four thousand French. Also will he give one thousand French in credit, which is two thousand Chili."

"And it will be six fathoms long?" Nauri queried.

"Aye," answered Mapuhi, "six fathoms."

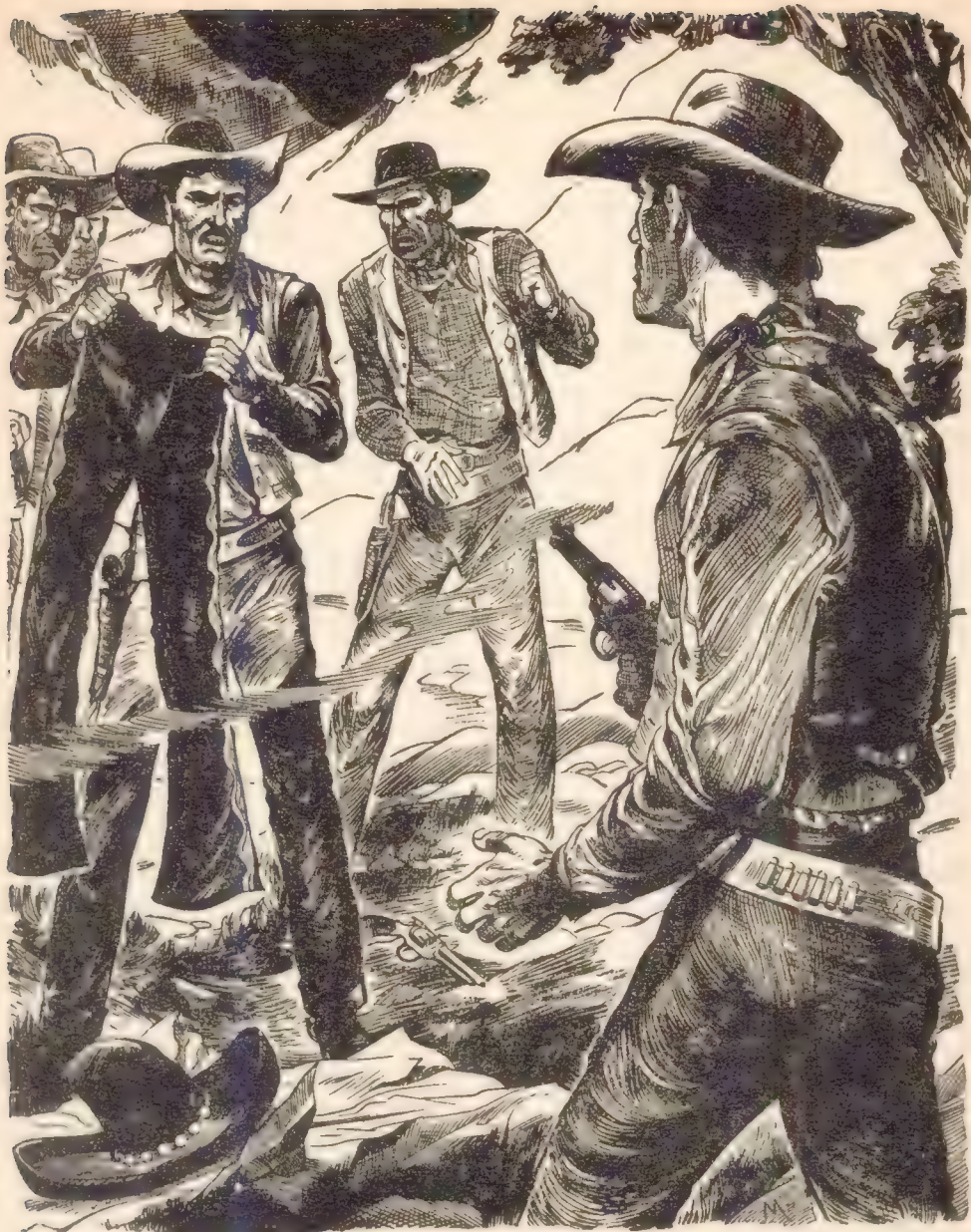
"And in the middle room will be the octagon drop clock?"

"Aye, and the round table as well."

"Then give me something to eat, for I am hungry," said Nauri complacently. "And after that we will sleep, for I am weary. And tomorrow we will have more talk about the house before we sell the pearl. It will be better if we take the thousand French in cash. Money is ever better than credit in buying goods from the traders."

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*The one man who went for his gun had it shot out of his hand.*

## BADMAN'S BRITCHES

*By Allan K. Echols*

Any 'ornery, owl-hootin' son could shoot up a bank and gun-whip helpless folks, the way El Toro did. But only one hombre was fit to wear his pants.

7—Action Stories—Winter

SIESTA WAS JUST A WIDE place in the trail to Mexico, a general store dominated by its bar and gaming tables, a livery stable, a scattering of adobe and false-front shacks—and a thoroughly bad reputation. You could say

"Law!" and every man in town would grow tense and reach for his gun.

This man who looked like a giant with Spanish blood in his veins rode into Siesta about sundown, left his horse at the livery stable and hurried to Firenze's store and saloon to wash the trail dust out of his tonsils. Which was what visitors generally did first in Siesta. They also generally came pretty well heeled with money. And so did this man.

When Firenze poured him a drink and asked, "Come far?" the man looked him in the face blankly and answered, "Oh, been here and there."

That was about as definite an answer as any of the visitors ever gave about their business, and that satisfied Firenze. But after a couple more drinks, the stranger remarked:

"I was kinda hoping to bump into a hombre they call El Toro. A friend of his kinda wanted me to look him up if I ever ran into him."

And that was the way the right kind of a hombre would have asked the question as to whether Firenze knew a hombre called El Toro, The Bull.

"Never heard of him," Firenze answered, in strict accordance with his code. "Some friend of his; you say?"

"Yeah. Feller named Squatty Vamoose, back up in Mesquite Valley. Squatty wanted me to get in touch with Toro—"

"Never heard of him," Firenze repeated. "Have another one on me."

The stranger dropped the subject, drank a few more, went across the street to eat, came back later and bucked a faro game for a while, losing without a squawk, and finally went off to bed—satisfied with his beginning.

It was not at all surprising that nobody in Siesta would tell a stranger that he knew El Toro, because even in a town which existed solely for the purpose of being a hideout for outlaws, El Toro was considered bad medicine. Few had claimed to have ever seen him, but many knew about him.

His reputation was known all up and down the Border. He was a lone wolf, a man who had been making life not only unprofitable, but unbearable, for half a dozen mining companies which were digging ore out of Wildhorse mountains. He

always worked alone, a big man on a black horse, who wore a suit of black broadcloth cut Mexican style, and decorated with silver braid from the seams down the sides of his bell-bottomed breeches to the crown of his sombrero. He was a flashing spectacle when he pounced down on a load of bullion, and the tricks he could do with his six-gun made gun experts stick up their ears.

The tales told how El Toro had picked up a fortune off those bullion wagons in the past few years. But now the story was getting a new chapter. El Toro had suddenly changed his tactics. He had come down to the town of Mesquite Crossing and robbed a bank, and for the first time, he had not worked alone, but had brought a gang with him. The bank had lost a hundred thousand, and three employees, including the young daughter of the Cashier had been killed dead.

El Toro was growing. And so was the number of people who would like to get their hands on him.

THE second evening, after the sun had dipped down behind the Wildhorse peaks and cooled things off a bit, the stranger dropped into Firenze's again and drank a bottle of *cerveza*, the luke warm Mexican beer Firenze served. There was a scattering of men in the place, hard eyed hombres who glanced at the stranger, sized him up with interest, and returned their attention to their drinks.

The stranger sat down at a table and drank his beer slowly. Nobody paid much more attention to him until a big man in khaki breeches and khaki shirt opened at the neck to expose a thick growth of black hair on his chest bought a bottle of beer and brought it over to the stranger's table to drink it.

The man had a good look at the stranger as he approached, and the stranger had a good look at him. They were both more than average in size, both had dark hair and dark eyes and broad shoulders. But there the resemblance ceased.

"Hot, ain't it?" the intruder asked, sitting down. "I ain't seen you around before."

The stranger drained his bottle and held up two fingers to the bartender who came with two more bottles.



"Plenty hot," the stranger answered. "First time I been down here, though I've heard a lot about it. Friend o' mine used to drop in here once in a while. This friend, they called him Squatty—"

"Wouldn't be Squatty LeFlore, would it?"

"No. They call him Squatty Vamoose. As I was sayin' he told me—"

"Where'd you happen to know this hombre?" the intruder asked.

"Oh, just around," the stranger answered. Then eyeing the other sharply, he asked, "Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I just heard of him. Heard he was a friend of this here now El Toro—"

"Yeah," the stranger said, appeased, "Matter of fact, he is. He was tellin' me that if I ever bumped into this El Toro, he had a message for him."

"Wonder if I know this Squatty Vamoose hombre. Seems like I might have met him once. What kinda lookin' hombre is he?"

"Just like the name Squatty says he looks. Got one eye missin'—"

The bartender brought two beers and the intruder paid for them. He drank half his bottle in silence, spent some time in thought, then said:

"Tell you what. I know a man down on the creek that claims he knows this El Toro pretty well. Now if you wanted to come down, I'd be proud to make you known to this feller, and he can take the message—"

"Good," the stranger answered. "I'd be plumb happy to deliver it."

They got their horses and rode down to the creek bottoms, passing through post-oak and cottonwood until they came to a pole cabin concealed beside a shallows. It was dusk now, but a dim light was burning in the cabin.

"I didn't get your name?" the man asked the stranger.

"Oh, they call me Caliente, sometimes," the stranger answered vaguely.

They went inside, where there were four men playing cards. The men dropped their cards and drifted to positions with their backs to the wall. All wore their guns. Caliente did not seem to notice this. They all eyed him suspiciously.

His guide introduced Caliente, "He says

that Squatty Vamoose has a message for El Toro," he explained.

Nobody said anything. The silence was complete—tense. The rippling of the creek over the shallows came in through the door.

Caliente backed up against a wall himself, then asked: "Well, where's this hombre that knows El Toro?"

Before anybody could answer, one of the men countered with another, speaking to Caliente's guide. "Know who this feller is, Jake?"

"I figgered he was all right," the big man answered. "He knows Squatty Vamoose, who is a friend of El Toro's."

Jake then looked at Caliente, "Well, what is this message?" he asked.

"It's for El Toro," Caliente said. "I reckon I'd better deliver it to him in person."

The eyes of the other men turned to Jake, who was obviously the leader of the group. Big Jake scratched his chin, then turned to Caliente.

"I'm the hombre that knows El Toro," he said. "I'll take the message to him."

CALIENTE rolled a cigarette while he thought this over. The other men waited silently, tensely, for his answer. Then Caliente spoke.

"El Toro lost a man on that bank job. Squatty Vamoose is recommending me to take his place. I want to join up with El Toro."

He let this sink in while he watched the men from behind the match he held to his cigarette. The men all looked at big Jake.

Jake eyed him sharply, "Ever had any experience? So I could tell El Toro, of course. He might ask me."

"I think the Rangers would tell you I've had plenty—if they knew who I was." Caliente grinned. "The details don't matter."

The hawk-faced one of the group said, "That's what he says."

Caliente eyed him coldly. "Keep your jaw shut, little stuff, or I'll show you. I wasn't talking to you."

The man decided not to go on with the subject.

Big Jake said, "You're talkin' to a man that's right handy with a gun, mister."

"This handy?" Caliente asked. His

weapon was a blur as it came out and covered the hawk-faced man.

A tight smile hovered on the corner of his mouth as he dropped his weapon back in its pouch. He had seen surprise on the faces of every man in the room, particularly the face of Hawk Face.

He turned back to Big Jake. "Well, what about it?" he asked. "Do I join up with you?"

Big Jake's eyes opened, then narrowed. "With me?" he asked.

"Yeah. That's what I come for, ain't it? Why keep on chasin' around the corral about it?"

A red-faced man laughed. "Kinda got you betwixt a rock and a hard place, Jake."

Then Jake came to a sudden decision. "Well, we got to have another man to take Red's place." He turned to Caliente, "All right, hombre. You get a trial—and to-night. But you better be good."

"You won't be disappointed in me," Caliente said evenly. "Just tell me what to do."

"We got a little job—"

Hawk face butted in again. "Lissen here, Jake, you don't know this hombre from Adam's off ox. What's eatin' on you?"

Big Jake scowled at the pinched little man. "Shut yore jaw. I'm runnin' this shebang. I'm takin' a chance on him because we gotta have him. An' he ain't gonna pull nothin' on me and live over it. There's five of us to one, ain't they?"

Hawk Face shrugged and kept his mouth shut. Jake turned back to Caliente:

"I'm taking a chance on you because you look like you ain't afraid, and you can handle a gun. But the rest of us can handle a gun, too, and if you got any tricks up yore sleeve, it would do me a world of good to salivate you right pronto. If you've heard much about El Toro, then you know I ain't wastin' words."

"That's suits me," Caliente said. "Now reckon you could tell me where I fit into this play?"

"You'll know soon enough," Jake answered. "But here's the general idea. The Jackfork Mine is haulin' a load o' bullion out tonight. I been hittin' 'em pretty hard, so they're cooking up a little fandango for me an' the boys. They got a fake haul comin' down with a couple o' guards

around it. They figger I'll hit 'em where they cross the creek at Stony Ford, so they've got a posse that'll hide in the woods around the crossin'.

"Then," Jake grinned, "here's the trick. We're supposed to get caught in that trap, while the real haul comes along half an hour later, it bein' a spring wagon with only a couple o' guards along. We're gonna cut in back of the fake haul and hit the real stuff while this army is waitin' for us at the ford."

Caliente seemed impressed. "You sure got it figgered out," he said admiringly. "You must have inside stuff."

Jake laughed. "I have," he said. "That mine can't outsmart El Toro."

"No," Caliente observed thoughtfully. "They tell me El Toro don't like to be outsmarted."

"He don't." Jake observed sagely. "It don't pay."

SOME TIME after dusk, Jake and his five men, including Caliente, pulled their horses up along a ravine in the foot of the hills and dismounted. Jake pulled a warbag off his saddle and proceeded to get out of his clothes. Caliente watched him interestedly.

Clad in only his long underwear, big Jake opened up the gunny sack and brought out packages wrapped in newspapers. He opened these as Caliente watched.

Lying on the ground in the opened packages, Caliente saw an outfit of black broadcloth breeches decorated with silver braid. In a separate paper was an ornate black Mexican sombrero.

"A man would sure know that outfit anywhere," Caliente observed.

Big Jake grinned as he lifted up the black pants and looked at them. "Yes, sir, them's my trademark. When a man sees that outfit, he just gets scared and naturally don't offer much resistance."

"Those people in the bank put up a fight, didn't they?" Caliente asked.

"Sure, them fools. But they got what was comin' to 'em. It'll be a lesson to anybody else."

"Did the little girl put up much of a fight before you killed her?" Caliente asked evenly.

Jake gave him a quick suspicious look, stopping in the middle of putting on the



black pants. "What's that to you?" he snapped.

"She wasn't any kin of mine," Caliente answered. "But I'd always heard that El Toro only hit those mine companies. Something about them having stolen those claims that belonged to him through an old Spanish land grant. I hadn't heard about him hittin' banks, and shootin' down little girls."

Big Jake's face turned red. He finished putting on the pants and a black sateen shirt, over which he slipped the black, silver-trimmed Spanish vest. Then he buckled on his pistol carefully. He turned to Caliente:

"Now what was that crack about killin' little girls?"

"My crack was that I don't believe El Toro would have done that," Caliente answered.

Jake's voice was soft and cold. "Listen, mister, get this straight before we go any further. What El Toro does is none of your business."

"I think different," Caliente said. "It's plenty of my business."

Caliente had taken a step backward, and his gun was out and covering the five men. Hawk Face started for his gun. Caliente shot it out of his hand. Then Hawk Face's hands went up with those of the rest of them.

"Listen, boys," Caliente said. "I'm not looking for you at all. I'm not the law. And when I leave here you won't be hearing from me again. But I've got one little job to do, which is to deliver Big Stuff here to the law for killing that little girl."

A look of puzzlement came over the faces of the group. Without lowering their hands, they looked at one another.

"It's like this: when a man wants to disguise himself, it's a simple matter to rig up his clothes so that they're the thing that catches the eye, instead of his face. That's how come El Toro wore that gaudy outfit. People just remember that he was big, and wore them fancy clothes.

"All right. El Toro used that idea, and worked on those bullion hauls, just like I was telling you, because those mining



claims were stole from him. He got what he considered was a fair price for what he lost, and when he did, he quit. He rolled up his Spanish suit and left it in a cave where he sometimes hid out. Then he lit a shuck for Mexico.

"But along comes this jigger named Jake and finds the suit. It fits him, so he decides to play El Toro. He does some fancy robbing in them clothes, and El Toro naturally gets the blame. He shoots down a little girl in the bank, and El Toro wouldn't have done that, even if he had robbed the bank.

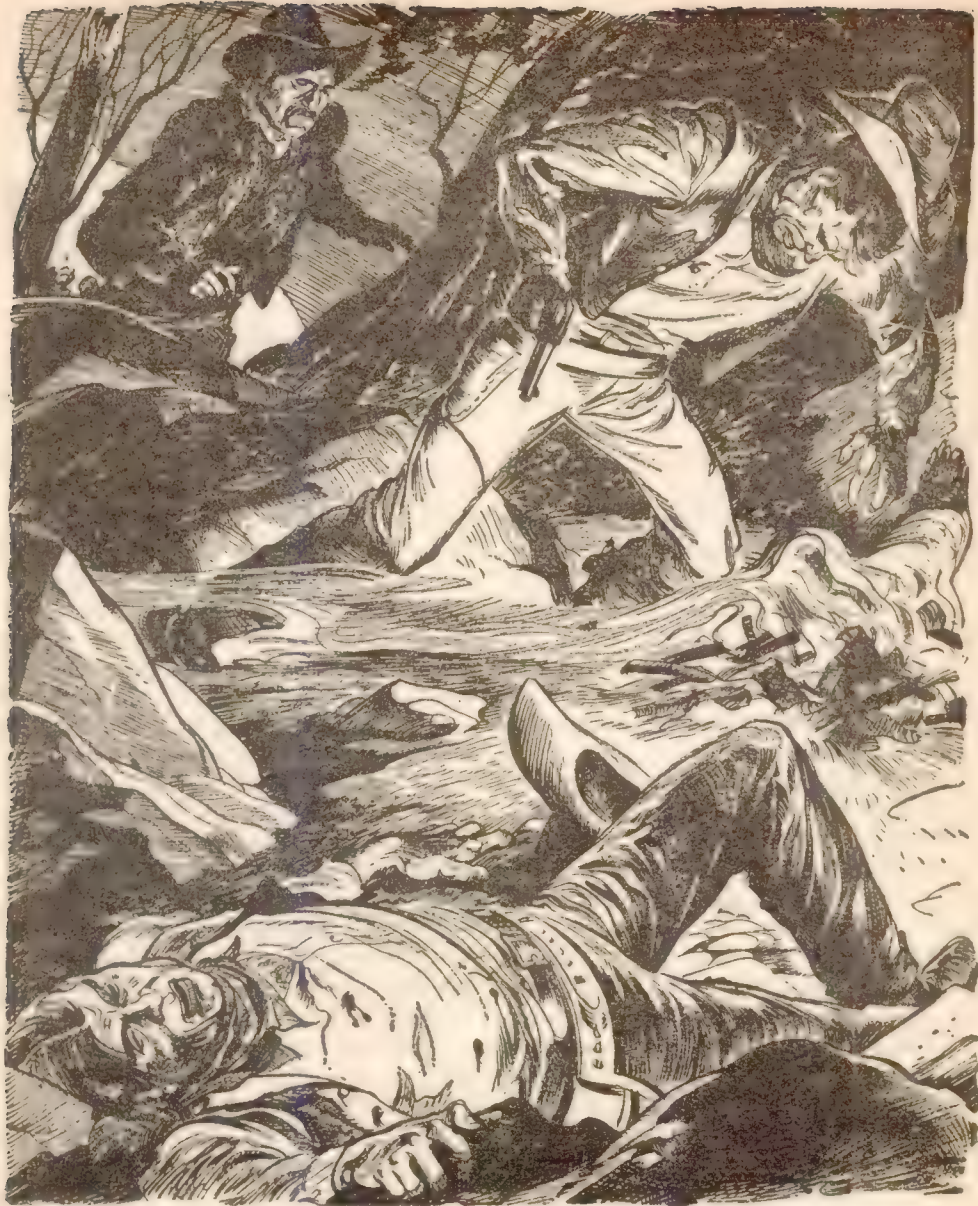
"Just like Jake planned it, folks thought they recognized him by that suit. Well, I'm taking him in and let the witnesses look him over. I think they'll swear that he is El Toro, all right, particularly with them clothes on. So, as far as tonight's job is concerned, it's all off for him and me. What you boys do is none of my business, as I said before."

Hawk Face looked at big Jake. "You mean he ain't El Toro? You sure of that?"

"That's one thing I'm sure of," Caliente said.

"How come?"

"Because those are my breeches he stole. I am El Toro."



Burly Jess Morgan stared numbly at his grass swept clean of cattle, the smoking ruins of his ranch, the stiffening bodies of his crew. Was this the work of the famous Senorita Scorpion—the girl Robin Hood of the Southwest?

JESS MORGAN TURNED A bland pale-eyed stare on his foreman. "Looks like they're heading for the Mexican border. 'Bout three hundred head, I'd judge from the tracks, driven hard by five maybe six men. It's Cabrera's work, all right."

"Well?" demanded Pink Ferguson, reining his horse alongside Morgan, "what are you going to do?"

Jess lifted himself in the saddle, squinting down the broad shimmering emptiness of Sulphur Spring Valley. The ragged blue peaks of the Chiricahuas hung threat-



# Gun-Witch Of Hoodoo Range

*By Emmett McDowell*

*He fell forward across the fire, his gun dropping from nerveless fingers.*



eningly over the two men like a tidal wave. The Dragoons to the west were a thin violet line on the desert's horizon.

"If it's Cabrera," Jess said thoughtfully, "he'll swing around the foot of the Swisshelms into the San Bernardino Valley gathering cattle as he goes."

"Then what are we sittin' here for?" Ferguson demanded angrily. "He ain't but a few hours ahead."

Morgan smiled, but the smile didn't quite reach his eyes. He was a large chunky man of twenty-five or thereabouts

with a square likeable face blackened by wind and sun.

"You ride back to the 10X, Pink, and get the men. Send Billy Rupp over to the CCC for Ernie Rafflock. Reckon some of Ernie's cattle'll be in that herd. Then hightail it back here. I'm sticking on Cabrera's tail."

Ferguson scowled. He was a lantern-jawed, red-haired man a little older than Morgan.

"Damn it, Jess, Cabrera's a fox. You ride into a trap and you wouldn't stand a

chance——" He broke off as Morgan began to smile again. "All right, all right," he said hastily. "But don't crowd him, Jess." He wheeled his horse, spurred up the valley.

Jess Morgan was mounted on a buckskin, a big rangy animal standing all of sixteen hands. Jess turned him into the trail of the stolen cattle, urged him into a trot. The buckskin had a reaching foot, but man and horse seemed to crawl along the foot of the mountain leaving a tiny explosive trail of dust. The tracks of the stolen cattle stretched south straight as a string.

It was following the pattern—a pattern that had become only too familiar to Jess since coming to this southeastern corner of Arizona Territory. A few more such raids and he'd not have a head of stock left.

Near the mouth of Wolf Spring Canyon, Jess caught sight of cattle in the brush-choked coulees. Stringy longhorns, wild as antelope. They appeared singly at first, but farther along they were in small bunches.

He whistled soundlessly, swerved close enough to recognize his own 10X brand on their ribs. The next bunch were blaze-face Herefords and bore the Coronado Land and Cattle Company's CCC. The rustlers must have cut Rafflock's wire to get at those.

This obviously was the herd that Cabrera had been trying to make off with. But what had stopped him?

Reining the buckskin to a walk, Jess leaned from the saddle and studied the scuff marks in the sandy soil. Once he dismounted and cast about on foot, head bent, walking with the short choppy steps of the habitual rider.

"I'll be damned," he muttered in a mild voice.

From the sign it looked as if the raiders had run into a party of horsemen riding up from the south. Cabrera had abandoned the stolen cattle, engaged in a running fight as he fled towards Wolf Spring Canyon.

The breeze veered suddenly, bringing with it the distant rattle of shots.

Morgan's head lifted. He heard another report, louder, and then a pause followed by a ragged burst of firing.

By George, he thought, it sounds like a gunfight. Cabrera and his men must be holed up in Wolf Spring Canyon!

Tom Hunter's cabin, he knew, was located about a mile up the canyon where the hard-bitten ex-buffalo skinner had homesteaded some of the best water in the territory. Cabrera might have forted up there.

Old Tom had a bad name anyway. Nothing that could be proved. But he didn't welcome visitors. There was a good deal of talk about Hunter and Big Ben Ash, another two bit rancher a few miles to the south . . .

The breeze died, the rattle dying with it.

Jess vaulted to the saddle, raking the buckskin with his spurs. Except for the scattered cattle and a lone buzzard spiraling in the updraft of the mountains, the valley itself still appeared deserted.

JESS MORGAN had drifted to Arizona in '81, a mild-mannered, soft-spoken Texan with an eye like blue flint and a driving passion to run his own cattle on his own land. He looked an easy mark and more than one person had made the fatal mistake of taking him at face value.

In Texas the best land was taken. He was shrewd enough to see that cowhands generally remained cowhands—in Texas. But Arizona was raw and new and there was land for the taking. Land, but not many cattle.

Jess had driven three herds from cattle-poor Texas across New Mexico into Arizona. On the last drive he'd run into Rube Holden in Tucson.

Rube had been a small rancher on the Brazos, Jess' home country. He had made the drive to Arizona two years before settling in the Chiricahuas on the edge of Sulphur Spring Valley. But when Jess met him, he was in Tucson, broke, his cattle gone, his wife killed by Apaches.

"Son," he'd told Jess. "It's the finest cattle country you ever seen. Only there ain't no cattle. What the outlaws don't get, the *ladrons* do, if them damned nesters or bronco 'paches don't butcher 'em first."

But he had sold Jess the land.

Morgan smiled thinly, the sun striking sparks from his narrowed blue eyes. He'd



gone into this with his eyes open and, by George, if he had to go to herding jack-rabbits, he was sticking.

He was still a quarter mile from the broad grassy mouth of Wolf Spring Canyon when a rider on a pinto burst suddenly from the sycamore screened draw. They saw each other at the same instant. The strange rider gave no sign but flung his horse at right angles, spurred south.

The sun was higher, hotter. Jess could see dust spurt up from the pinto's driving hooves. The stranger seemed in a powerful hurry to get away from there, hunched over the pony's shoulders like a jockey.

Too big a hurry, considering the morning's events.

Jess yelled and swerved to head him off, sandwiching him against the rocky slope of the mountain.

The man came straight on. He looked like a Mexican in black doeskin *chivarras* and a peaked sombrero. They were only a hundred yards apart when the Mexican's arm swept up and a gray-black toadstool puffed suddenly from his fist.

Jess heard the report a fraction of a second later.

The Mexican fired again. The slug hit Jess' saddle horn, went screaming across the valley. Something plucked at his sleeve. The whine of a fourth shot zinged past his ear like a hornet.

Morgan's eyes had blackened to indigo. He hauled up the buckskin, hit the ground on the off side, running, and yanked the Colt from his holster. His horse was plunging skittishly. Jess leveled the long barrelled 44.40 beneath its neck.

The Mex must pass within forty yards of him. Then Jess caught him in the sights. His finger whitened on the trigger.

At that moment the wind tore off the Mexican's sombrero and Jess saw that he was wearing a hood. A green silk hood that covered head and neck!

Only it wasn't a he—it was a she!

**A** STONISHMENT held his trigger finger, and the next instant the girl was past in a cloud of dust. A lithe slim figure in the tight Mexican *chivarras* and loose white cotton *camisa*. One side of her blouse was streaked with scarlet.

Wounded!

Jess vaulted back into the saddle intending to overtake her, but she twisted around, fired twice. The slugs buzzed uncomfortably close. He flinched, pulled up the buckskin.

He couldn't shoot. But the girl in the green silk hood was troubled by no such scruple.

Jess sat his nervous mount, watching her dwindle into doll size. He thought he saw her reel in the saddle but she caught herself. She might be bad hit, and he half considered trailing her out of gunshot range. Then she disappeared around a spur of the mountain.

He wouldn't forget her. The odd green hood. The cat-like grace with which she clung to the pinto's shoulders. Good Lord, who could have shot her? And why? Abruptly he reined the buckskin around.

All hell must be breaking loose up Wolf Spring Canyon!

The sun glinted from the pools of water in the half dry creek, turned the milky inner back of the sycamores luminous. It was hot—hot with that dry shimmering heat of mid-summer in Arizona. Morgan wiped dust and sweat from his face with a red bandana, wiped his palms. He was allowing the buckskin to pick his own way up the canyon at a cautious walk.

He couldn't rid his mind of the girl in the hood. Old Tom Hunter had a daughter, but he couldn't imagine Meg Hunter in a get-up like that. He didn't know of any other girls in the region.

There were plenty of women in Tombstone and Bisbee, in the hog ranches and dance halls. Adventuresses drawn by the smell of money . . .

Something clicked in Jess' brain. Tombstone! He'd heard of a girl in one of the Mexican dance halls on lower Allen Street who always wore a mask. No one ever saw her without it. She even slept in it.

*El Escorpion*, Senorita Scorpion! That was her name. The girl in the green silk hood!

There was a story about her, he recalled. She was young and pretty, and she'd stolen a man from Cherokee Annie. Annie wasn't a girl to take a thing like that lying down. Annie had rammed a broken beer bottle into the Scorpion's face.

Senorita Scorpion had recovered her health but not her looks. For a while

she'd dropped out of sight, then she'd reappeared wearing a fitted green silk mask. She'd had plenty besides a pretty face, and she hadn't minded showing it to the best advantage. The mask had added just the right note of wickedness. In a week the Scorpion had become the sensation of Allen Street . . .

Jess' horse suddenly snorted, picked up his ears. He was off him like a shot, lunging for his head, clamping his hand over his nostrils.

From up the canyon came the faint sound of a shout. Then he heard a woman scream piercingly, again and again, her cries echoing, reverberating from wall to wall.

Jess could feel the hair on the nape of his neck lift like the hackles of a dog. The pure yellow sunlight spilling into the canyon lent a peculiar note of horror to the cries.

He tethered the buckskin in a *motte* of cottonwoods. Then he began to run up the trail, awkward in his high heeled half-boots, the Colt in his hand.

As he closed the distance he caught the rumble of men's voices. Suddenly the trail opened into a grassy park. Jess slid behind a sycamore, staring at the scene in the clearing.

Fifty yards off an older woman sat on the ground, her apron over her head, rocking her shoulders in a spasm of grief. Tom Hunter's yellow-haired daughter stood motionless in the grip of two men, staring at a writhing figure that dangled from the limb of a cottonwood.

The kicking form spun slowly until Jess could see the blackening face and protruding tongue. It was old Tom Hunter himself!

And they were hanging him in front of his wife and daughter!

Impulsively, Jess raised the Colt, steadying it across his crooked forearm, took careful aim at the rope . . .

And fired.

## II

**I**N THAT CANYON THE REPORT multiplied itself into a fusillade. Acrid black powder spewed from the muzzle, drifted back into Jess' nostrils.

Six inches from the limb, the rope

parted. Hunter fell like a sack of wheat to the ground and lay motionless.

Meg Hunter was the first to recover her senses. She jerked free of the startled men, flung herself on her father, loosened the noose about his throat.

"Ma!" she cried. "Ma, he's still alive!"

The woman scrambled to her feet, flew to old Tom's side.

There were four men standing about the tree staring towards Morgan, who recognized them as CCC riders—Dodge, the Coronado Cattle Company straw boss, and three others whose names Jess didn't know. Their hands were sliding towards their guns.

"I wouldn't fool around them guns," Jess sang out cheerfully. "They might be loaded."

The downward motion of their hands stopped.

"Who are you?" Dodge demanded in a high harsh voice. "Show yourself." He was a thin hatchet-faced man, bow-legged and wearing two bone-handled revolvers.

Jess stepped out from behind the sycamore. "What's the trouble, Dodge?"

Dodge's eyes glittered angrily. They were pale gray like sea water, his mouth a down curving slice.

"What call'd you have to butt in?"

"Why, Dodge, I didn't know you'd been elected public hangman."

Dodge looked not quite so certain of himself.

"He's a damned murdering rustler an' we caught him red-handed——"

"That's a lie!" Meg cried passionately, looking up from where she and her mother were working over Hunter.

"So you say!"

The other men eyed Morgan, their faces expressionless. There was something dangerous in the way they stood, legs spread, knees bent a little as if about to explode into violent action.

Beyond them Jess could see the big double log cabin with a roofed dog-trot between its two halves, and behind that the pole corral and barn. Three cowponies stood hip sprung in the bare dirt of the corral switching at flies.

His eyes darkened suddenly. Another man sprawled grotesquely on his face behind the pole fence, looking like nothing so much as a bundle of rags.



"Your boss is on the way here," he told Dodge. "I sent for Rafflock when we cut Cabrera's trail."

"How'd you know it was Cabrera?"

"Had all the earmarks."

Dodge nodded. "Reckon it did. We blundered into him out in the valley gathering up everything he could find. He cut an' run. Holed up in Hunter's cabin. Old Tom was with him."

"He was not!" Meg said.

Jess let his eyes slide over the unconscious man. Hunter lay on his back, breathing in labored gasps. His bald head glistened with sweat. His gray, bushy and tobacco stained beard was matted with dust. Brogans encased his sockless feet and he was wearing a hickory shirt and overall pants that a respectable cowhand wouldn't be caught dead in.

A two-bit rancher, Jess sized him up; shiftless, hating the big cattlemen who were squeezing out him and his kind. Hating them enough to throw in with the lawless element.

"Did you see him with Cabrera?"

"No," Dodge admitted. "But we sure heard him an' that old Sharps of his'n. He shot Andy Jenkins from the cabin. Got him dead between the eyes. That big fifty blew out Andy's brains like an egg out'n its shell."

Meg looked sick but said stoutly, "Why wouldn't he fight? You all were shooting into the cabin. You didn't care who you hit."

Dodge ignored her. "We got Cabrera and one of his men through the chinks. They're lying in the cabin now. The others sneaked out afoot. All except the girl. She made a ride for it and got clean away."

"What girl?"

"Senorita Scorpion. You know, that dance-hall gal who runs around in the fancy green mask. She was with Cabrera. She may have caught a bullet; I ain't certain."

"What about old Tom here?"

"He tried to ride for it like the girl. Bud shot his horse out from under him, an' we grabbed him." Dodge swung suddenly on Meg. "There ain't no call to work on him no more, Miss. We're stringing him back up to that cotton-wood!"

MEG HUNTER drew in her breath. Her face was bloodless beneath its tan, her dark gray eyes sick, horrified.

She was a tall girl, Jess realized, almost as tall as himself and taller than Dodge. Her yellow hair had come undone. There was dirt on her face, dirt on her tight, dove-gray bodice.

"But Pap wasn't with them!" she protested.

Dodge looked at her, letting his silence answer. There was some quality about the gunman, implacable, deadly as a rattle-snake, that took the heart out of the girl.

Jess could feel the hostility of the CCC riders, the cold watchful stare of Dodge. He grinned crookedly and then said in a mild voice, "No, Miss. We're taking him to Tombstone for trial."

The silence that greeted Jess' announcement was explosive. Dodge's eyes flattened, and he gave Jess an ugly stare. He saw a burly man who looked soft and slow, a man who'd avoid trouble. He turned back to the CCC hands, barked sharply, a little contemptuously, "String Hunter up! And if Morgan objects——"

That's as far as he got.

The long-barrelled Colt was still dangling from Morgan's hand. He pounced like a cat. There was no preparation, no warning. From a flat-footed stance, he leaped at Dodge, chopped him behind the ear with the heavy barrel.

The blow made a dull "crack!" It knocked Dodge's head out from under his hat, split his scalp. The gunman pitched limply to his face.

"Anybody else want to hang old Tom?"

The three riders found themselves staring into Jess' cold blue eyes above the muzzle of his revolver. They went rigid.

"It's yore deal."

"Why, then," said Jess, "unbuckle your belts and let 'em slide, one at a time. You, on the left, first."

Silently they complied and stepped back, regarding Jess with a surprised sort of anger and sheepishness. The silence spun out like a spider web.

It was broken by the shrill neighing of a horse from down the canyon.

Ernie Rafflock, superintendent-foreman of the Coronado Cattle Company, appeared first in the trail. Rafflock was a big man on a big gray horse. Besides

managing the CCC, he had his own ranch in the Swisshelms, a few miles south of Wolf Spring Canyon.

Pink Ferguson rode a little behind Rafflock, anxious-faced, crowding the CCC boss. Pink was followed by two more Coronado hands.

At sight of Jess, Pink slid from the saddle, leaving his reins trailing.

"Gawd a'mighty, what happened? What you been doing?"

Jess said, "How the hell did you get here so quick?"

"Didn't have to go to the ranch. Met Mr. Rafflock trailing Cabrera. Him an' a couple of his hands."

Rafflock dismounted ponderously, a scowl on his face, and nodded at Jess. He must have weighed all of two hundred pounds, and his feet in hand-tailored, high-heeled boots looked tiny and incongruous. His black eyes, alive as coals, had taken in the scene instantly—Dodge and Hunter stretched unconscious on the ground, the two women fussing over Hunter, his own unarmed riders, even the dead man a hundred yards off.

He didn't say anything, but looked at Jess pointedly for an explanation.

"There was a slight difference of opinion." Jess grinned, but he didn't holster his gun. "Your *segundo* wanted to hang old Tom. In fact, he did—almost."

Surprise deepened the scowl in Rafflock's face, and he looked down at Dodge and then back at Jess.

"Cabrera?"

"Cabrera's dead. His woman got away though. Girl by the name of the Scorpion."

"The girl in the green silk hood?"

"Yes." Jess explained what had happened.

"I don't like it, but you're right," Rafflock admitted grudgingly. "Dodge went too far. We'll take Hunter into Tombstone for trial."

"But he didn't do anything!" Meg burst out.

Rafflock faced the girl with an inscrutable expression. "I'm sorry, Miss. But that's for a jury to decide."

Meg's chin set in angry lines. "He won't have a chance against you. You with the law in your pocket! You'll frame him into Yuma. And then you can

buy up this homestead cheap, can't you?" Her tone was acid. "Or so you think! Well, let me tell you, Mr. Big, you won't gobble us up like you did the Fallices down in the Swisshelms and Henry Jackson and the Yances—"

"Meg!" her mother tried to stop her but the girl was past stopping.

"Get out! Get out!" Tears suddenly stung her eyes and she turned to Jess. "Mr. Morgan, you won't let them take Pap."

"He'll get a fair trial, Meg."

She flashed him a scornful glance. "You siding Rafflock? Did you ever hear of the mouse that set up housekeeping with the cat?"

An awkward silence got hold of them. In the midst of it old Tom groaned, struggled to his elbows. He turned bloodshot eyes on Rafflock, tried to speak but only a croak emerged.

Meg flew to the spring, came back with a gourd dipper of water. Hunter tried to drink.

"Faugh!" he sputtered and spat out a cud of tobacco. "Don't give a man a chance to spit out his chaw before you string him up." He drank painfully, the water spilling out the corners of his mouth.

"Who cut me down?"

"Morgan."

"Shore enough," Hunter wheezed. "Ain't you disappointed, Rafflock?"

Rafflock said suddenly, "Hunter, I'll give you five hundred dollars for your place and three days to get out of the country."

"That's damn white of you," Hunter began, his eyes red and furious.

"No, Tom!"

Everybody stared at Hunter's wife. She had risen to her feet and stood over her husband with a fierce protective look on her gaunt face like a hawk over its nest.

"But, Ma," Meg started to protest.

"We've done nothing to be afraid of," said the woman. "We'll take our chance with the law." She gave her husband a quick veiled glance.

Old Tom visibly brightened.

Jess Morgan, who never missed anything, made a mental note to keep his eyes open and his gun handy on the long ride into Tombstone.



COTTONWOOD HOLE lay on the eastern slopes of the Dragoons across the arid Sulphur Spring Valley. It was a favorite camping spot for the freighters hauling lumber from the saw-mills in the Chiricahuas to the booming town of Tombstone. But tonight there was no fire to light them in, Morgan saw, as he rode a little ahead of the others beneath the rustling cottonwoods.

A chill breeze had begun to whip across the desert with the setting of the sun. He shivered. The men were dark shapes watering their horses to the accompaniment of splashes and snorts.

It hadn't been a pleasant ride across the blistering desert. Old Tom had been taciturn and red-eyed, his feet lashed beneath his horse's belly. Dodge, sullen, furious, itching to start a fight and restrained only by the presence of Rafflock.

Once late in the afternoon, Jess had thought he'd seen dust. It might have been Mrs. Hunter, who had stayed on at the ranch until Meg could fetch Tobe and Curly Ash, the sons of a neighboring rancher, to look after things. Then she and Meg were supposed to come into Tombstone.

Jess frowned, built a cigarette. He let his eyes range the circle of firelight. Rafflock was squatting on his heels, talking earnestly in low tones to Dodge. He caught Jess' eye, beckoned him over.

Jess pushed himself to his feet, crossed the circle of firelight.

"Sit down, Morgan," Rafflock said. "Me'n Dodge want a word with you."

Jess squatted on his spurs.

Rafflock said, "Speak your piece, Dodge."

The gunman gave the CCC boss a sour look, turned back to Jess. "Morgan, I'm willing to forget that business back to the canyon. I was wrong, I reckon. At least, Ernie says so. But don't never hit me again—right or wrong."

"That's good with me," Jess said.

Rafflock's expression relaxed into joviality. "I don't want no trouble between you boys. Dodge here is my right hand." He lowered his voice. "Frankly, Morgan, I ain't been too sure of you."

Jess grinned but didn't interrupt.

"You land here with a passel of tough Texas hands. You talk real friendly but

you don't say much. I've kinda had an eye peeled in your direction."

"It don't hurt to be careful."

"No, it don't. But I'm satisfied and I reckon Wright and Finnerty will string along on my say-so. I want you to come in with us, Morgan."

Jess permitted surprise to show on his face. Dick Wright over in the San Pedro and Joe Finnerty in the San Simon were well-to-do ranchers, their spreads almost as big as the Coronado Land and Cattle Company.

"Come in on what?"

Rafflock's black eyes reflected little dancing flames. "How many cattle you lost, Morgan?"

"Damn near all of them."

"That's what I figgered. It's got so an honest man can't run a cow unless he's hand in glove with the rustlers. Me'n Finnerty and Wright are organizing. We're gonna run out the damn thieves. Put the fear of God in 'em."

"The sheriff——" Jess began.

"Johnny Behan!" Rafflock snorted contemptuously. "He's too busy keeping up his political fences to chase cattle thieves. No, we got to wash our own dirty clothes."

"A vigilante committee?"

"Call it that if you like."

Jess built another cigarette. "Don't get me wrong," he told Rafflock hesitantly. "I'd be pleased to throw in with you. But I doubt if I'd be much help. My boys ain't been paid in three months——"

The scowl left Rafflock's forehead. "Hell," he interrupted, putting his hand on Jess' shoulder. "I figgered that. I can let you have enough cash to tide you over."

Jess was genuinely surprised. "But——"

Rafflock slapped him on the back. "I don't aim to lose nothing, son. I collect my ten percent on the loan and cover myself with a mortgage on your place. I ain't lost any money yet through bad investments."

"I got to think about this," Jess said.

"Sure, sleep on it. If you take me up, we can sign the papers tomorrow in Tombstone. But, remember, we're danged anxious to keep the honest cattlemen here."

Jess lay awake a long time thinking over Rafflock's surprising offer, wondering what had prompted it. The fire died down

to a bed of coals. Jess could see the glow of a cigarette as Hunter's guard smoked to keep awake. Hunter himself snored unconcernedly.

At length Jess rolled up in blankets and closed his eyes. No use looking a gift horse in the mouth, he thought and went to sleep.

He was roused by a gun poking him savagely in the ribs.

### III

JESS SAT UP WITH A JERK, feeling for his gunbelt. It was gone. The moon had risen dappling the earth beneath the cottonwoods. He heard a faint gasp. Then the gun was jabbed into his ribs again.

"You!" a startled voice hissed. "I thought—. One would think you dead, *senor*."

Jess' spine tingled as if some one had poured cold water down it. That voice!

"*Quien es?*" he demanded hoarsely.

He was answered by a low laugh and then he knew. It was a girl!

"Silence," she whispered, "unless you want your backbone be carved."

Jess didn't desire it. The girl's hands patted him lightly in search of a holdout gun. Beyond the cottonwoods a horse blew in sudden fright. Jess could see shadows moving, hear the rustle of feet. The cottonwoods were full of men, he sensed.

"Don't move!" the girl whispered in his ear. "You are surrounded." She crossed noiselessly in front of him, passing through a shaft of moonlight. Jess sucked in his breath.

Senorita Scorpion!

The girl was clad in tight doeskin chivarras and a light blouse. She was tall and lithe and walked with the catlike step of an Indian. The green hood looked black in the moonlight.

Somebody gave a startled yell from across the dead fire. There was a thud and the yell broke off in the middle.

El Escorpion paused in mid-stride.

As if the yell had been a signal the cottonwoods erupted into life. Brush snapped. Voices barked at them, ordering them not to move, that they were covered.

Jess took advantage of the confusion to roll behind a trunk. The girl had his gun. He rooted his nose in the sandy soil, divided between curiosity and apprehension, dreading the first nervous trigger finger that would signal a raking fusillade of shots.

"Senor Hunter," called Senorita Scorpion softly. "Are you free?"

From out of the darkness old Tom grunted, "Yes, gal."

The girl's voice rose. "Do not try to follow, Senor Rafflock. You and your men have been disarmed."

Rafflock cursed.

She laughed, a silvery peal that floated back to them in the still night air like a bell. There was the sudden thud of hooves, dwindling into silence.

"Gawd a'mighty!" a stricken voice swore. "They got our horses!"

A match flared. In a moment the fire was blazing, the men crowding about it sheepishly. They had been deftly relieved of their guns while they slept. Not a shot had been fired. Senorita Scorpion or one of her men had crept up on the guard like a wolf and laid him out cold with a rifle barrel.

Jess rolled a cigarette listening to their talk.

"Who'd ever thought that Scorpion gal would've come back fer old Tom? Reckon he was part of the outfit, all right."

Rafflock raised his voice. "Time we got started for Antelope Springs. That's the closest we can get horses."

"That's seven miles!" Pink Ferguson wailed. He'd edged around the fire beside Jess. "What're we supposed to do, walk?"

"Nobody's going to carry you," Jess told him.

"Yeh. Well, what're you grinning about?"

"Nothing," Jess said. "I was thinking I'd like to meet Senorita Scorpion."

"You just did," said Pink dryly.

THEY ARRIVED in Tombstone at second drink time and left their borrowed horses at Dunbar's Corral on Frenont Street, a wide dusty thoroughfare of red desert sand lined with one- and two-story shacks.

"We'll get the sheriff started on Senorita Scorpion's trail," Rafflock told Jess, "and then we'll step around to the bank.



Get that loan fixed up." He turned to the others. "Come on, boys. The first drink's on me."

At the Alhambra, Jess got Pink aside.

"I'm going over to the sheriff's office with Rafflock," he told his foreman. "Drift along Allen Street, Pink. See what information you can pick up. Everybody's going to be talking soon as the news gets out that Cabrera's dead. And don't get liquored up."

Pink Ferguson pulled a long face. "Liquored up on three bucks?"

"Don't look so danged sanctimonious. You can cadge more than a bar rag. Meet me at Spangenberg's Gun Shop in two hours. Sober."

At the sheriff's office, Behan promised to send out a posse but he didn't hold out much hope of catching El Escorpion and Hunter.

"The way I figger it," he said with his feet on his desk, "Senorita Scorpion ain't going to amount to much with Cabrera dead."

Rafflock growled like a baited bear, turned on his heel. "Come on, Morgan. We ain't gonna get no action here."

Behan jumped up. "Now don't go getting on the warpath, Ernie. I'll send out the posse. I just say the Scorpion's lit out fer the border and she won't stop running this side of Mexico City."

Rafflock grunted, made for the street. When he and Jess were out of earshot, he began to curse.

"He'll send out a posse!" His voice was heavy with sarcasm. "They'll ride to Antelope Spring and liquor up. Then they'll ride back saying they lost the trail." He shook his head. "Well, here's the bank. How much you figger to need?"

"'Bout six thousand. I can ride down to Mexico, buy a herd. You can take a mortgage on the cattle and land . . ." He let his voice trail off.

A buckboard drawn by a span of shaggy range ponies had turned into Allen Street. Meg Hunter was holding the reins in gloved hands and her mother sat beside her.

Jess stepped out into the street, took off his hat, a broad grin on his face. The two women gave no sign that they saw him. The buckboard clattered past, Meg and her mother staring straight ahead.

Unperturbed, Jess swung up in back.

"Don't like to intrude. But if you're looking for your paw, you've come to the wrong place."

Meg's eyes snapped open and she pulled up the ponies. She was wearing an iron gray traveling dress, pinched in at the waist, bustled in the rear with newspaper. Jess could hear it rustle as she twisted to face him.

"What're you driving at, Mr. Morgan?"

"Old Tom escaped."

"What?" cried Mrs. Hunter. Meg's mouth fell open.

"Yes'm. The Scorpion gang jumped us at Cottonwood Hole, took Tom away from us. Makes it look bad for old Tom."

The brief expression of gladness faded from Meg's face. Her clear gray eyes clouded. "I didn't think of that!"

"No. I reckon not."

Color suffused the girl's throat and cheeks. "What do you mean?"

"I mean it was a damn fool play," he told her bluntly. "He should have stood trial. They didn't have nothing on him but killing Jenkins and that was a clear case of self defense."

"But we didn't—didn't . . ."

"No? Then who did send word to Senorita Scorpion that we was taking old Tom to jail?" Jess swung down, stood with one hand on the wheel. "The best thing for Tom to do is come in and give himself up."

"Now?" Mrs. Hunter's gaunt face set in angry lines. "After that hussy's pried him loose!"

Jess grinned suddenly. "He didn't break no law getting away from us."

Meg looked surprised, then her glance fell on Rafflock watching them from the sidewalk in front of the bank. Her eyes darkened.

"Go on back to Rafflock," she said furiously, "and tell him it didn't work!"

She slapped the half-broken brones with the reins. Startled, the animals lunged ahead, leaving Jess standing in the middle of the street.

AS JESS LEFT the bank after completing his business with Rafflock, he saw the posse clatter out of town at a high lope. Dodge had been deputized, and Bud Polk. He recognized Porfy Bartlet,

the ex-army scout, and Buckskin Frank Leslie, one of the deadliest killers and shrewdest trackers in Arizona.

That posse meant business.

Pink Ferguson was loitering in front of Spangenberg's Gun Shop when Jess turned the corner. "C'mon. We'd better get heeled."

"You got money?" Pink demanded incredulously.

Jess slapped his middle where the six thousand dollars reposed in his money belt. "It's payday on the old 10X."

Pink let out a whoop of joy and crowded into the gunshop on Jess' heels. The red haired foreman picked out a pearl-handled, nickled colt with a ten-inch barrel.

"Gimme my money. I'm a curly wolf and this is my night to howl."

Jess counted out the greenbacks. "You stay sober. I don't want to bail you out of the calaboose in the morning." He selected a walnut-pommeled 44.40, hesitated over a ten-gauge shotgun, finally bought it.

"Loaded for bear, ain't you?" Pink observed.

"I don't aim to get separated from this money belt. Did you pick up anything in town?"

"Not much. Senorita Scorpion met Cabrera in one of them Mexican dance halls. He used to ride in after dark to see her. Then, one night, she jest up an' disappeared. She's been seen once or twice with Cabrera since then. That's the tally."

Jess was silent until they reached the street. "I still think it's damned queer Senorita Scorpion came back for old Tom. What call'd she have to rescue Hunter? Now, if it'd been Cabrera, I could understand her risking her neck. But old Tom . . ." He shook his head.

"Maybe it appealed to her sporting blood," Pink suggested.

Jess gave the red-haired puncher a disgusted look. "What you know about women," he said dryly, "you could put in a peanut shell and then it would rattle around like a pebble in Grand Canyon."

**A**LTHOUGH JESS didn't leave Tombstone until the next afternoon, he was able to unearth nothing more about Senorita Scorpion. There were plenty of stories, most of them obvious lies.

But why the girl in the green silk hood should have turned back to rescue Hunter remained an enigma.

It was dusk as Jess and Pink left the last foothills of the Dragoons behind and struck across the sandy wastes of Sulphur Spring Valley. Jess had timed it that way in order to cross the desert after night-fall.

The blood-red sunset faded to lavender, to gray. They were following the freighter's road, Jess a little in advance with the shotgun hanging by a thong from his saddle horn.

"First thing tomorrow," he told Pink, "take the boys down to Wolf Spring Canyon and round up them cows that Cabrera drove off. Push 'em back up on our range."

He broke off talking as his horse picked up his ears, whinnied. "By George," he said, lunging for the shotgun.

A rifle exploded in a clump of mesquite not twenty yards off the road! In the dusk Jess could see the orange spurt of flame lance towards him. Only the fact that he was leaning over for the shotgun saved him.

Then his startled horse began to buck. His fingers missed the stock.

He heard Pink open up and the rifle speak twice more. Suddenly his pitching horse missed its footing in a gully and crashed down. He managed to kick his feet free of the stirrups before he struck. Then his head cracked against a stone . . .

Jess was dimly conscious of somebody stooping over him, tearing at his shirt. As if in a dream he heard shots and yells and then the tattoo of hooves diminishing into silence.

"Jess! Jess!" Pink was shaking him by the shoulder. "Wake up."

The night suddenly snapped into focus. It was completely dark and chill. He shivered as he recalled the drygulcher concealed in the mesquite.

"Did he get away?"

"Yeah," Pink growled furiously, "with your money belt!"

Jess slapped his stomach with both hands. The belt was gone! He remembered being dimly aware of somebody stooping over him.

"Why the hell didn't you stop him?"

"Your cayuse bucked you right into his



arms." Pink sounded offended. "When I located him, he already had your belt and was fixing to put a bullet through your brain—if any. I shot. Missed, I reckon, because he jumped his horse and went helling out of here."

"What'd he look like?"

"It was dark. I didn't get no good look at him."

Jess began to swear furiously.

Pink said, "Reckon we'd better get back to Tombstone and notify the sheriff. I'll catch your horse."

"No!" said Jess suddenly. "Hell, no. Keep this under your hat. I don't want it to get back to Rafflock that I lost that six thousand dollars."

Pink was silent. Finally he asked, "What're you aiming to do?"

"Get it back!" Jess said savagely. "There wasn't but damn few people knew I was carrying that money!"



#### IV

THE 10X RANCH BUILDINGS, A loose collection of log and adobe structures, sprawled along the north side of Star Canyon about a half mile above its mouth. Jess Morgan and Pink galloped up on lathered horses, flung themselves from the saddle.

They were greeted by silence.

By silence and rising threads of smoke from the blackened embers of the ranch-house, the barns and outbuildings.

Jess felt numb with disbelief. He had ridden off the other morning with the picture of his ranch in its wild and lovely setting filling his eye. Cooke had been scouring kettles behind the kitchen. Mormon Charlie topping off a bronc . . .

Now this!

Pink began to curse in a monotone. But Jess was silent, his expression unnaturally calm. Only a faint paling of his skin, the glitter in his blue eyes betrayed the seething inner fury working in his veins.

"Who done this? Who done it?" Pink suddenly shouted.

Jess shook his head. It was incredible, monstrous. It was like the work of Indians. But the marks of steel shod hooves and high-heeled boots left no doubt that it had been done by white men.

8—Action Stories—Winter

The smell of smoke clung to everything. Jess began to poke around in the hot ashes, caught sight of the charred remains of a body where the kitchen had been.

"Pink. Come here."

"That's Cooke," Pink said looking as if he were going to be sick. "That horse-shoe-nail ring. I'd know it anywhere."

They found the scorched body of Mormon Charlie behind the bunkhouse, where it looked as if he'd made a break for the rocky slope towering above them. He'd been literally riddled. Jess counted nine wounds.

"Hey," a weak voice hailed them from the rocks overhead. "Hey, you fellers, come pack me down. I got a bullet hole in my leg."

"Billy!" said Jess and began to scramble up the slope with Pink on his heels.

They found Billy Rupp lying behind a nest of boulders, white faced, the freckles standing out like pennies. He had managed a tourniquet on his right thigh with his neckerchief. A Henry rifle was propped against the rock beside him.

It took considerable manoeuvring, but they got him down the mountain side, laid him out in the shade of a cottonwood.

"How'd it happen?" Jess demanded in a toneless voice.

Billy shook his head. He was just twenty, a skinny youth who looked as if he were put together out of rawhide. He was barefooted and hatless.

"First we knowed," he said, "the bunkhouse was blazin' around our ears. We run out and they began to pour lead into us."

"You didn't see anybody?"

"It was dark."

"Where're the other boys?"

"They rode into Wilcox." Billy looked embarrassed. "They said they wasn't coming back."

Jess' eyes narrowed. "When'd they drift? Before or after the fight?"

"Before. Yesterday morning."

"How come you and Mormon Charlie and Cookee stayed?"

"Hell, Jess, we rode all the way from Texas with you. We wasn't worried 'bout our money."

Morgan's face softened. He said, "Pink, hitch up the buckboard. Take Billy into Wilcox to the doctor. And wire the sheriff. Better send word to Rafflock, too."

"What about you?"

"I'm going to see if I can't pick up their trail."

"Damn it, Jess, you can't tackle that gang alone!"

"I don't aim to. You get back here with help. I'll leave plenty of sign wherever I go."

Pink took a look at Jess' face, saw that it was useless to remonstrate further. He mounted, rode off for the big pasture to bring up horses.

Fortunately, the buckboard, parked under a tree, had escaped the fire. They fixed Billy Rupp in the bed as gently as possible. Pink mounted to the seat.

"Take care, Jess," he said. "I'll leave Billy with the doctor and ride straight back."

Jess watched the buckboard rattle down the canyon, dust dripping from the iron tires. Pink turned once and threw up his hand, then they were out of sight around a clump of live oak. He could hear the wheels on stone where the trail crossed the creek bed. Then that was gone too. The silence was complete.

Jess walked about inspecting the damage. One wing of the ranchhouse that had been built of adobe and a stone storeroom

were all he had that remained standing.

"Why?" he kept asking himself, "why? Who would want to do a thing like this?"

But he could find no answer.

At length he caught up his horse, rode down to the big pasture where he roped a blaze-faced roan with plenty of bottom and changed saddles. He turned the livery stable horse loose, started a wide circle of the grounds.

It didn't take him long to pick up the trail. The raiders had made no effort to conceal it at this point. It led straight up Star Canyon into the mountains.

For the next two miles there was no place that the raiders could have turned out. Jess started off at a high lope. He hadn't gone a hundred yards when his eyes lit on a streamer of green silk caught on a limb.

The snag on which it hung fluttering was about head high, just right to slash across a rider's face as he rode beneath it. He lifted it down, held it to his nose.

It still smelled faintly of perfume.

Jess wondered if he could bring himself to shoot a woman. But when he thought of Mormon Charlie and Cookee he guessed maybe he could.

TWO MILES above the 10X ranch buildings, three canyons came together to form an irregular star. Here in the loose rock, Jess lost Senorita Scorpion's trail.

Although he searched for it the better part of the afternoon, he couldn't pick it up again. After a while, he gave up and sat his horse in the shade of a rust-red wall of rock, smoking, his blue eyes indrawn.

Senorita Scorpion had rescued Tom Hunter, who must still be with her. Sooner or later old Tom would try to get in touch with his wife and daughter. Might even be at the Rafter H now, though it wasn't likely. Anyway, Wolf Spring Canyon was the likeliest place to pick up the Scorpion's trail again.

Jess turned his horse back towards the valley.

That night he slept in the open. By ten o'clock the next morning he was ensconced behind a boulder a hundred yards up the side of Wolf Spring Canyon. Directly beneath him lay old Tom's cabin,



his barn and corrals spread along the creek like a map.

Jess waited with the patience of a cat at a mouse hole.

Presently he saw Mrs. Hunter appear from the open areaway between the two halves of the cabin. The woman stood in the yard staring anxiously up the creek. All at once she stiffened, leaned forward.

It had been the cowponies, he realized, who'd told her someone was coming. Their ears were pricked forward and they'd wheeled around facing up the canyon.

One of the horses whinnied. It was answered by another horse still out of sight beyond the barn.

In a moment the rider moved into Jess' view. It was Meg mounted on a jug-headed paint. She was wearing scarred black leather chaps like a man, levis and half-boots with big Mexican spurs. Jess could see them glitter in the sun.

She slid from the paint in front of her mother, and the two women stood there a moment, talking. Jess was too far away to hear what they said. But Mrs. Hunter appeared excited.

Meg shrugged, led the wiry paint to the corral where she unsaddled him and turned him in with the other cowponies. Then she disappeared into the barn.

Jess shifted position. Where had the girl been? To meet her father? Was the Scorpion gang holed up back in the mountains somewhere?

A thin string of smoke began to rise from the cabin's chimney. Meg reappeared, minus her chaps, and entered a small roofless enclosure beside the barn.

From his perch, Jess had an unobstructed view down into the enclosure. A big tub of water had been rigged overhead on the barn roof, he saw. His eyes suddenly widened.

Meg was shucking off her dusty range clothes!

Then she gripped the rope that dangled from the overhead tub, gave it a tug. The tub tilted in its cradle, spilled lukewarm water down over her like a shower.

Like David catching a glimpse of Bathsheba bathing on the roofs of Jerusalem, Jess was hooked!

How had it happened, he wondered in surprise, that he'd never really noticed

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Meg before? It occurred to him suddenly that there was no reason why he shouldn't get married once this trouble in the valley was over. And plenty of good reasons in favor of such a move.

The distant bawl of cattle brought him back with a disagreeable start to reality and remembrance that this girl was in the opposite camp. She was Tom Hunter's daughter and old Tom was siding Senorita Scorpion's gang . . .

Then the whole matter was thrust out of his mind. The cattle, by the sound of them, must be headed up Wolf Spring Canyon straight for the cabin below. He could hear the yelling of the cowboys, see the dust foam up through the leaves of the trees.

Meg had heard it too. She dressed with furious haste, ran out of the enclosure.

"Ma!" she called, her voice rising clear as a bell to Jess perched like a hawk in the rocks. "Ma!"

Mrs. Hunter appeared in the yard totting a shotgun. She and her daughter faced down the canyon towards the rising pound of hooves.

Jess saw the head of the herd burst from the trees, the point riders jogging along at a trot. The snaky river of red hair and tossing horns flowed past beneath him, swinging around the barns and corrals.

Dust boiled up from beneath their hooves, and the swing riders had their neckerchiefs over their noses, their hat brims down over their eyes. The herd continued to flow out from beneath the trees as if it had no end. It swept past the two surprised women and on up the canyon.

The CCC brand on the cattle's ribs left no doubt about who was throwing this herd onto Hunter's range. Then the drag came into sight and disappeared again up the canyon. About three hundred head in the drive, Jess estimated.

Rafflock was losing no time preempting the Rafter H water now that old Tom was on the dodge. And then a doubt struck him. Maybe Rafflock knew about these cattle—and maybe he didn't!

The dust was beginning to settle. He could see Meg and her mother talking to each other with excited gestures when a rider came into sight from around the barn.

The women stopped talking and stared. It was one of the men who'd been with the herd. He was dusty and his neckerchief was still pulled over the bridge of his nose. He rode slowly across the yard and dismounted.

Up in his perch, Jess stiffened.

It was Dodge! The gunman had ridden back alone. Jess could see Meg recoil a step and Mrs. Hunter swing up the shotgun.

Alarm squeezed suddenly at his stomach. Why had Dodge returned alone?

With infinite caution, Jess began to work his way down the slope crab-wise, taking advantage of every bush and stone until he got the cabin between himself and the group on the flats. He could hear the crash of brush, the bawling of cattle growing fainter up canyon. And then Meg's voice, shrill with anger, "Let go of me!"

The shotgun boomed!

Jess forgot caution, plunged down the precipitous slope like a goat.

## V

WITH THE ECHOES OF THAT shot still ringing in his ears, Jess brought up hard against the rear wall of the cabin. He caromed off the mud-chinked logs, drawing his gun, ducked into the dogtrot. From the broad roofed areaway, open at front and back, he could see straight through to the yard.

Meg was sitting on the ground as if she'd been hurled there, Dodge and Mrs. Hunter struggling over the shotgun. Jess was just in time to see the gunman wrest it away.

Dodge caught sight of Jess in the dogtrot at the same time. Instantly he swung the muzzle around, turned loose with the second barrel.

Jess sprang sideways through the door of the cabin on his left. The charge of buckshot raked the logs, ripping out long splinters of wood. There was no time to waste. He stepped back into the areaway, six-gun raised.

Dodge, he saw, had dropped the empty shotgun and snatched his bone-handled Colts. The gunman was in the very act of thumbing the hammer.

Jess fired.

Their shots rang out almost together.



Dodge was doubled over and flung backwards as the .44 slug caught him in the belly. He fired again, but the bullet went wild, knocking a splinter of stone from the chimney.

Jess was still shooting. His second bullet broke the gunman's right arm six inches above the wrist. His third struck Dodge's hip and knocked him down.

"Damn you, damn you," Dodge swore, struggling to raise the Colt in his left hand, "Just let me take you along."

Jess shot him in the mouth.

He kept pulling the trigger until a dry "click" informed him that his gun was empty.

LESS than fifteen seconds had elapsed since the first exchange of shots. Jess sank down on the bench inside the dog-trot, began to reload his Colt. His fingers shook so that he could scarcely plug in the shells.

He heard Mrs. Hunter say, "Go get a blanket to put over him. The flies'll get at him there."

Meg appeared in the dogtrot, walked unsteadily into the other half of the cabin. Her face was bloodless, blue eyes glazed.

Jess stood up, found that his legs had lost their rubbery feel, and stepped into the yard.

"You hit?" Mrs. Hunter demanded.

"I don't think so."

"No," she said, peering at him sharply.

"You can rest your mind. Though it's a miracle you ain't."

Jess jerked his chin at the dead gunman. "What did he want?"

"He said he come to move us out. Said Rafflock was going to use this cabin for a line shack. Meg flared up and ordered him off. He knocked her sprawling. I took a shot at him, but he was too quick for me. He knocked my gun in the air and wrestled it away."

Meg returned, carrying a blue homespun coverlet.

"Wait a minute," said Jess. He stooped over Dodge, ripped open the shirt exposing a leather money belt, which he unbuckled and yanked off. "All right, cover him up."

Meg's eyes were enormous as she spread the coverlet over the gunman.

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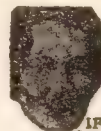
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Jess had opened the belt and was counting bills. His six thousand was there intact, also three thousand, seven hundred dollars of Dodge's money. He caught Meg staring at him open-mouthed and grinned at her.

"The rewards of virtue," he said and buckled the belt about his waist.

He turned to Mrs. Hunter. "There was six men with Dodge moving them cows. They'll have heard the shots——"

He broke off, reached for his Colt, backing into the dogtrot. Meg gasped.

Two men on horseback were coming up the creek at a dead run.

"Never mind them," Mrs. Hunter said with relief. "That's Tobe and Curly, Big Ben Ash's boys. They been givin' us a hand on the ranch."

"They stand by you in a fight?"

Meg said, "They'll stick."

"Good."

The two riders galloped up, flung themselves from their lathered ponies. Jess noticed with satisfaction that they both had rifles in saddle scabbards.

"What in Samhill's come off here?" the eldest brother demanded. He was wearing a vest over a blue flannel shirt, fawn colored pants, fancy stitched half-boots with big silver spurs. "Me'n Curly seen a herd turn up the canyon. Before we could get here it sounded like the battle of Bull Run was being fit."

Curly had jerked down the coverlet. "Dodge! Jee-rusalem!"

Jess said, "No time to explain now. Curly, get up in them rocks over the cabin with your rifle. You go to the barn, Tobe. Mrs. Hunter can take one side of the cabin with her shotgun and Meg the other."

"What th——"

"Go on!" said Jess. "We're past due for company."

The two brothers yanked their rifles from the scabbards, started in opposite directions.

"Run, damn you!" Jess yelled. "I think I can hear them."

They broke into awkward lopes, Curly scrambling up the steep side of the canyon, Tobe disappearing into the barn.

"Get those horses behind the house," Jess told Meg.

In seconds he was alone in the yard.

Then the clang of a metal-shod hoof rang sharply in the silence.

"Come on out!" Jess yelled. "But keep your hands away from your guns."

The silence dragged itself out. Jess, standing in the open, could feel his flesh crawl. Finally a voice called from behind the barn,

"I'm coming. Don't shoot."

"Come ahead."

Bud Polk rode around the barn at a walk. The other CCC hands trailed him uneasily.

"There's Dodge," Jess said, pointing at the blanket covered figure. "Tie him on his horse an' take him along with you. You got one hour to get them CCC cattle back into the valley. Now get a move on."

Bud Polk's eyes widened in dismay, and the blood flushed up into his Indian-like cheekbones.

"Since when did you start giving orders, Morgan?"

Jess smiled bleakly. He didn't answer Polk, but lifted his voice.

"Tobe!"

"Yeh," Tobe answered from the barn.

"Curly!"

From the rocks overhead Curly shook his rifle in the air. The twin barrels of Mrs. Hunter's shotgun slid across the sill of the cabin.

"You boys figgerin' to make a fight of it?" Jess asked dryly.

Bud Polk's skin yellowed. His eyes shifted to the rocks, to the barn. But mostly they clung to the ugly snout of the shotgun peeping over the window sill.

"That beats me."

"Hit the trail then," Jess said in a bleak voice. "Go on. Hit it!"

JESS MORGAN accepted Mrs. Hunter's laconic invitation to eat with alacrity. After the meal he said he'd better go look after his horse. He had hidden the roan in a clump of cottonwoods about a mile down the canyon.

To his surprise Meg said she'd go along with him.

She was still wearing the faded levis and high-heeled boots, and the big Mexican spurs jingled as they crossed the baked clay yard. It was the only sound until the cabin was left behind.



Jess said, "Meg."

"Yes, Mister Morgan."

"My friends generally call me Jess."

"Yes, Mister Morgan."

She was looking at him, he realized, with a twinkle in her gray eyes. Her lashes were long and smoky black. She had a firm chin, a short nose with a spattering of freckles across it. Her lips were full, parted a little in a half smile so that he could see the luster of her small white teeth like the inside of a shell. Altogether it set his pulse to jumping.

He pushed his hat to the back of his head, grinned. "All right, Miss. But what do you folks aim to do?"

"Who's side are you on?"

"My own."

"You're not sidin' Rafflock anymore?"

"Does it look like it?"

She gave him a perplexed glance. "That's no answer. There was bad blood between you and Dodge. You might've made that an excuse to rid yourself of him. You're cold-blooded enough to've done it."

"Don't try to flatter me," he said dryly. "I'll string along with Rafflock so long as he's trying to get shut of the rustlers. But I don't hold with this sort of——"

"He's the biggest thief of them all!" she burst out passionately.

"Can you prove that?"

She stopped and faced him. It was sweltering in the canyon, and he could see a film of moisture on her earnest face.

"Jess, can't you see he's pulling the wool over your eyes? Rafflock's set himself up to be king of the valley, and he doesn't care how he does it. Why do you think he's paying fighting wages, hiring killers and outlaws?"

"Is that what you wanted to tell me?"

The girl bit her lip. "Yes. I had to find out whose side you were on."

"I told you. My own."

"You can't be. You're either for Rafflock or against him." She stamped her foot. "Oh! Why did I bother to come out here!"

"And all the time," Jess said with a serious face, "I been thinking it was my fatal beauty."

Meg began to get red.

"Men!" she burst out in a tone of loath-

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ing. "Ugh! A girl's a fool to get married!"

"You sound like you got something agin 'em."

"And why shouldn't I have? Look at Ma. She was beautiful—truly beautiful. And now look at her, worn out, old at thirty-nine. Work, nothing but hard work. That's what marriage is. That and bearing children."

Jess felt vaguely shocked. In his experience, nice girls didn't talk so freely.

"I know what you're thinking," she flung at him. "And it isn't fair. Why should the fancy women, girls like Senorita Scorpion, have all the fun?"

"What would you propose?"

She glanced at him slantwise from beneath her lashes, and her eyes began to dance again. "Not what you're thinking!"

Jess said, "You little devil," and grabbed her. To his surprise, he felt Meg relax. She lifted her face—and bit him. Bit him hard.

Jess couldn't have turned loose any quicker if he'd gotten hold of a mountain lion. Meg giggled. She sank on a rock laughing while he stared down at her disapprovingly.

"Next time," she said, "don't grab me so sudden."

Jess began to grin. "I got off the trail," he said dryly. "I wanted you to take a message to your paw."

"Take a message to Pap?" Meg quit laughing. "But I don't know where he is."

He paid no attention to her protestation. "Tell him to break off with El Escorpion."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to hunt her out of the country."

Meg looked startled. "But, Jess, what have you against the Scorpion?"

He told her about the ranch, about Mormon Charlie and Cooke. She jumped up, a frightened expression on her face.

"Jess, that—that's terrible. But Senorita Scorpion didn't do it. Somebody's trying to frame her. I—I know she couldn't have done it."

He gave her a strange hard stare. "What makes you so sure?"

"I—I—" she looked at him pleadingly. "Can't you take my word for it?"

"Sure. When you give me a reason.

Meanwhile, you tell your paw to get away from her and stay away."

Meg was silent until they reached his horse. She sprang up behind him, slipped her arms around his waist. They were almost back to the ranch before she spoke.

"Jess."

"Yeh?"

"Look at me, Jess."

He turned his head. It was a day of surprises. Meg kissed him quickly, fiercely, and slid off the horse before he could guess her intention.

Astonishment struggled with pleasure on Jess' wind-roughened face.

"All the more reason for you to get word to your paw," he drawled. "Because I aim to smoke out Senorita Scorpion sure as you're born."

"But, Jess," she cried indignantly, "I don't know where he is!"

"Then you better find him before I do." And tipping his hat, he wheeled the roan, rode down the canyon at a canter.

## VI

ONCE OUT IN THE VALLEY Jess headed south, away from the 10X. A quarter mile beyond Wolf Spring Canyon he turned into the mountains again putting the road to a steep slope. They went up it, slipping, lunging, striking sparks from the loose rock.

A narrow bench lay above, from which a trail zig-zagged back in to the Chiracahuas roughly parallel to Wolf Spring Canyon. Jess broke twigs as he rode along it. Twice at forks in the trail, he dismounted, built a small cairn of pebbles to show which way he'd taken.

In less than an hour, he had circled the Rafter H and had reached a point half a mile above Hunter's cabin overlooking the canyon. There he squatted on his heels, smoking one cigarette after another.

It wasn't long before his patience was rewarded. Meg appeared on the trail below, pushing the paint horse at a smart clip. She passed beneath him, disappeared around a bend in the canyon.

Jess gave her plenty of time to get out of earshot before he mounted, spurred the roan over the edge.

The horse went down the side of the canyon on his haunches, a small avalanche



of stones rattling along with him. At the bottom Jess turned into the girl's trail. There was a faint smile on his face.

Presently Meg's tracks climbed out of the canyon to a high, thickly wooded bench with the rim rock towering above the pines. For a dozen yards, her trail led through the timber. Then it played out entirely.

Jess pulled up his mount with a frown. Suddenly he lifted his head, sniffed.

The faint acrid tang of woodsmoke filled his nostrils. A campfire. He must be right on top of Senorita Scorpion's hideout!

Jess tethered the roan in a stand of young pine, lifted the shotgun from the saddle horn. His feet were noiseless on the slick carpet of needles as he advanced warily toward the rim rock.

Unexpectedly the belt of timber came to an end. Jess peered out cautiously at the talus base of the cliff, along which lay a series of shallow wind-hollowed caves, looking as if they'd been scooped out of the soft red rim rock with a spoon.

A fire was burning in one of the caverns. Two men sprawled beside it, playing cards. Jess recognized the cadaverous features of old Tom. The other was a lean slim-hipped young fellow whom he remembered vaguely as one of the numerous Ash boys.

He could discover no sign of Meg nor the paint horse. Only the two men playing cards. Where was Senorita Scorpion and the rest of the gang?

He waited. The minutes dragged past and still no one else put in an appearance.

Jess stood up slowly, raised the shotgun. "Lift 'em, boys! Easy!"

The young fellow turned his head, grinned. Old Tom spat in the fire, called, "Gawd a'mighty, what's been keeping you, Morgan?"

A shiver of uncertainty rippled through Jess. "Go on," he said in a gray voice. "Reach!"

"Put that thing somewheres else," old Tom retorted. "You think we don't keep a lookout. Hell fire, Walt seen you coming two hours ago. Ain't that right, Walt?"

Walt Ash nodded. "Why, Morgan, you're covered right this minute."

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"That's an old trick," Jess said.

From behind him a girl's voice replied softly, "But a good one, *Senor!*"

A GUN prodded him in the small of the back. He paled, jerked involuntarily. The voice at his ear said, "Be so kind as to lay down your weapons."

The sweat began to roll down Jess' face.

"I bluff easy," he said and laid the shotgun at his feet, unbuckled his cartridge belt, let the holstered Colt drop.

"*Bueno!*" the girl said. "To the cave."

Jess picked his way up the talus.

"Seat yourself," she commanded in Spanish.

He squatted by the fire. Old Tom lashed his ankles and wrists with a piggin string. Jess' eyes, though, were on Senorita Scorpion as she nimbly ascended the talus.

The tight chivarras of softest black doe-skin fit her like a heavy tan. He caught the glitter of her eyes behind the slits in the green hood. An ugly Colt was trained at his belly. It looked like a cannon in the girl's small gloved fist.

"You are a fool, *Senor,*" she said in Spanish. "Why did you intrude yourself here? We had no quarrel with you. Now——" She shrugged her shoulders delicately, an ominous note in her voice.

"Then why did you burn the 10X?" he demanded.

"That silly story you told *Senor Hunter's* daughter! We are not interested in burning houses. There is no profit in it!"

"Then who did?"

"*Quien sabe?* But it was not us."

Cowpen Spanish was a second tongue to Jess, but there was something about the girl's words that puzzled him, and he stared at her hard.

As if to compensate for having to hide her scarred face, she was plenty free with the rest of her person. Jess frowned. He could make out no sign of a bandage through her thin white blouse though he could see near everything else.

A tide of red washed up the girl's throat to the edge of the green silk hood. That blank hood, relieved only by eye-slits, lent her the inhuman look of a cat. She was tall and slender with something cat-like about her movements too. Nor

did the tight black leggins detract from the illusion.

"Enough!" she said angrily and dropped to her knees beside Jess. With light deft fingers she unbuttoned his shirt, unbuckled the money belt.

"That's the dangdest thing to hang on-to," Jess remarked wryly.

Old Tom's eyes quickened, and he licked his lips. Walt Ash said, "Them's the kind of profits we're interested in. Hand it over, *muchacha.*" He held out his hand.

She said, "I will hand it to Don Ben and to no one else!"

"Don Ben!" Walt gave a short laugh. "Pap'll like that. Hand it here. I'll give it to him."

Senorita Scorpion's only answer was to pull up her blouse, buckle the belt next her skin.

"No you don't!" Walt lunged to his feet. "I'll be danged if you get away with that——"

Old Tom covered him quickly with the shotgun. "Leave her be, Walt. Wait till Ben gets here."

Walt's eyes were flat and ugly, but he squatted on his heels sullenly.

JESS had been listening with a glitter in his blue eyes. "I thought you was wounded?" He turned abruptly on the girl. If she was startled, the blank face of the hood hid it.

"It was only a scratch."

"How'd you come to tie up with this outfit?"

She ignored the question. It was old Tom who finally answered for her.

"My Meg found her. She was ridin' over to fetch the Ash boys when she run plumb into Senorita Scorpion lying unconscious in the trail."

"When was that?"

"Whilst you boys were taking me to Tombstone. El Escorpion wasn't bad hurt. The bullet had only burnt her ribs. But, what with being skeered half out of her wits an' thinking she was worse wounded than she was, she had keeled out of the saddle an' hit her head. My Meg carried her on to Ben Ash's place."

"It was Big Ben Ash and his boys that pried you loose from Rafflock, then?" Jess asked.

"Yes, sir," Hunter said. "And when



the Scorpion heard what was up, she was rarin' to come along."

"You talk too much!" Walt growled.

Jess said, "Say, where's Meg now?"

"She rode down to fetch Tobe and Curly."

"She didn't pass me coming up."

"Hell, son, there's more ways out of this place than a rabbit hole. Have a chew." He proffered his plug of tobacco.

Morgan shook his head, leaned his back against a boulder that had scaled from the cliff. Tom Hunter's story sounded straight, but something kept troubling him. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

IT was fairly obvious that old Tom, Big Ben Ash and his numerous progeny were rustlers. He heard Senorita Scorpion say something about rest as she moved from sight into another shallow cavern. Down in the pines a squirrel began to bark angrily and then fell silent.

"Now that you got me, Tom," he asked suddenly, "what do you aim to do with me?"

Old Tom's jaw worked a minute in silence. "Morgan, I'm fer turning you loose. But Walt here don't see it thataway."

"You're damn right, I don't," Walt snapped.

"So," Hunter continued imperturbably, "we're waiting to hear what Ben says. Ben ramrods this outfit."

"You talk too much!" Walt said again.

Old Tom grunted, wiped his mouth and chin. "Walt, you put too high a value on words," he told the younger man. "An' yours in particular ain't worth nothing."

Walt's face reddened. Jess chuckled.

"Morgan, don't get us wrong," old Tom resumed. "Listening to Walt there, you'd think we was the James boys. The fact is Rafflock's been pushing us two-bit ranchers pretty hard. We only take back what's ourn—an' maybe a mite more for interest."

"Seems like I've heard that song before," Jess said.

Hunter's eyes twinkled. "Speaking of hearing things, did you ever hear about Fallice down in the Swisshelms? Had him a nice little ranch, good water. Water's worth a powerful lot in a dry

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land. You got good water, ain't you?"

Jess said, "Yeh."

"Well," old Tom went on, "Fallice was killed and skelped and his shack burnt. Coroner's jury said 'Paches done it, but I've seen a heap of Indians in my time. If it was 'Paches kilt Fallice, I'm a parson."

"After the dust settled, there was Rafflock holding a mortgage on the Fallice place."

"Mortgage?"

"Shore." Old Tom gave Jess a shrewd look. "Anything bit you, son?"

"No. How'd Rafflock get the mortgage?"

"Wasn't nothing to it. Dodge and Bud Polk ran off all Fallice's cows. But Fallice didn't savvy what was behind the rustling. He and Rafflock was *campaneros*. Rafflock slapped him on the back, loaned him enough money to get a fresh start. Only Fallice didn't get to spend that money. Indians got him first. White Indians!"

Jess winced. "How do you know it wasn't bronco Apaches?"

"The money. 'Paches don't touch it. Not greenbacks. They got no use for it. And Fallice's roll was gone. Rafflock took over the ranch with his mortgage."

Jess said, "Seems I've heard the Yances mentioned too."

Tom shook his head. "Yance commenced to lose stock same as Fallice, but he didn't trust Rafflock. He borrowed from the bank. Then danged if he didn't lock horns with Dodge."

"Yance was slow as molasses, and Dodge put three bullets plumb between his eyes."

"Rafflock bought up Yance's mortgage from the bank whilst he was still laid out in the dry goods store."

Jess regarded him with hard unsmiling blue eyes. "Unhealthy for Rafflock to hold your mortgage, ain't it?"

"Practically fatal."

Tom squinted at the sun. It was like a red hot penny dropping into the slot of the hills. The belt of timber was already blue with shadows.

"Reckon, I'd better start supper——" he began, but he got no farther.

An orange-red gush of flame lanced from the cover of the pines. Jess heard

the *whack* of the slug striking flesh, the flat report of the rifle.

Old Tom was smashed back against the rock, his leathery bewhiskered face frozen in surprise. There were three shots so close together that they were just a blur of sound.

Walt Ash sprang erect, took a step forward. His gun never cleared his holster. He fell forward, began to roll down the talus.

There were more shots—four or five of them. Jess could hear them smash against the cliff. He squirmed frantically behind a boulder.

After that there were no more shots. Jess could see nothing but the gathering shadows, hear nothing but the silence.

## VII

COLD WITH SWEAT, JESS LAY there for what seemed like hours before he heard a voice rumble, "Guess that smoked 'em all out."

He went rigid, strained frantically at his bonds, hearing the crunch of footsteps on the talus. Then he recognized Rafflock's bass.

"Hunter dead?"

There was a pause, before he heard Bud Polk reply disgustedly, "Naw. Hole in his laig. Looks like one of the bullets creased him too."

Rafflock grunted. Someone threw wood on the fire. The flames caught hold, began to paint the rocks crimson.

"Only the two of 'em here," a strange voice put in.

Jess wondered suddenly what had become of Senorita Scorpion. The caverns beneath the cliff weren't true caves but a series of overhanging ledges. The rubble beneath them was studded with huge boulders that had dropped from the ceiling. It would be easy to slip away without being seen.

A flaming pitch-laden torch was thrust suddenly into his face. "Hey," Bud Polk cried, "Here's Morgan. Hog tied, by Gawd!"

"Haul him out!"

Polk grabbed Morgan by the shoulders and dragged him a foot or two beyond the boulder where the firelight could shine in his face.



Jess caught sight of Rafflock, glaring down at him like an angry Colossus. A smallish, thin-lipped man stood at his elbow.

"You didn't arrive none too soon," Jess grinned. "Cut me loose, Rafflock."

There was no answering smile on the big man's face. Without a word he stooped over Jess, grabbed his shirt, tore it open.

"Where is it?"

"What're you looking for?"

"The money belt you took off Dodge."

The grin on Jess' face had smoothed into a little crooked smile. He didn't answer.

"Where's that belt?"

"Find it."

Rafflock drew his revolver, trained it at the pit of Jess' stomach.

"What have you done with it, Morgan? I want that nine thousand dollars and by God I intend to get it."

"So you knewed that Dodge lifted the six thousand off me?"

"Morgan, where is it? Speak up or I'll put a bullet through your belly."

Jess' face was bloodless, the sweat standing out like dew. "Go ahead, shoot. You'll never find it!"

Rafflock began to swear in a low flat voice, then he turned angrily on Bud Polk. "It's bound to be here someplace. Look for it. Give him a hand, Montana."

It was black dark beyond the rim of firelight. Polk and the other man took torches, began to hunt among the boulders, their huge shadows grotesque on the cliff's face.

"Hey!" Polk said and tossed a bundle of clothes at Rafflock's feet. "One of 'em must took off in his drawers."

Rafflock kicked the bundle open, revealed a dusty pair of overall pants, a checked flannel shirt and run-down half-boots.

"Who do these belong to?"

Jess shook his head.

Bud Polk and the man called Montana returned to the fire. "No sign of it."

With a grunt, Rafflock grasped the front of Jess' torn shirt, hauled him half erect, hit him in the mouth.

"Where is it?"

Jess could taste the salty taste of blood.

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It began to trickle down his chin. He smiled wryly.

"You kill me, Rafflock, and that's nine thousand dollars you'll never lay your hands on."

Rafflock hit him again. Jess' head swam. He felt himself hurled to the ground. Then the giant began to kick him in the side. It was like burying a knife in his kidneys every time the pointed toe struck.

Dimly he could hear Bud Polk yelling, "Give 'im the hooks, boss! Give 'im the hooks!"

Something raked down his cheek like a branding iron. The red haze before his eyes thickened. He felt the boot land again, dully, and then he didn't feel anything.

Jess' first conscious sensation was pain. He bit off a groan, warned to silence by some animal instinct. Dimly he became aware of voices—mumbling. Mumbling. Then his senses cleared. He could hear Rafflock talking.

He was lying on his side, his face to the fire, his arms still tied behind him. Something touched his wrist. He almost jumped out of his bonds.

Biting back a yell, he could feel it working—working at the piggin string about his wrists. He didn't even breathe.

Who was it?

"Senor," a voice breathed. "Your hands are free."

Senorita Scorpion! She'd sneaked back. Must be lying on her stomach behind the boulder, reaching one arm out to work at his bonds.

He tried to move his fingers. They were numb, useless.

"Senor, there is a gun in your hand."

He tried to close his fingers around the butt. He couldn't even feel it.

He heard Rafflock say, "See if Morgan's come around yet."

Jess kept his eyes shut, lay motionless, breathing heavily. He could hear steps approaching.

"He's still out."

"Douse him with water. We ain't got all night."

The steps moved away, returned. A cataract of icy water struck him in the face and chest. It took his breath away. He gasped, choked and coughed.

"Possuming, by God!" Bud Polk burst out.

The icy water had stimulated his circulation, Jess realized. He could feel his fingers prickling painfully as the blood returned. He wriggled them experimentally. They curled about the butt of the revolver.

Rafflock strode up, gun in hand. "I'm tired of fooling with you, Morgan. Where's that belt?"

"You can go to hell," said Jess and jerking up his hand, he shot Rafflock in the belly.

THE boss of the Coronado Land and Cattle Company took a step and bent double, a look of incredulity on his face. He tried to lift his gun. Jess shot him again.

Rafflock went to his knees, still struggling to bring up his gun. Jess' third shot knocked him over on his back.

There was a flash and a deafening explosion in Jess' ear. Montana fell forward across the fire, his gun dropping from nerveless fingers.

"I ain't fighting!" Bud Polk yelled. "I ain't fighting."

Jess scrambled to his feet. Bud Polk began to back away, hands raised.

"Shed your guns."

Polk gingerly unbuckled his belt, let it slide, still retreating backwards step by step.

"Stop!"

Polk halted stiffly. Senorita Scorpion ran out of the shadows to old Tom's side, dropped to her knees. The stink of burning cloth began to sift through the air.

"Drag that man out of the fire," Jess rapped out. "Is he dead?"

Polk took hold of Montana's heels, pulled him clear. He stood up, nodded shakily. "He's dead."

"Who burned the 10X?"

Polk's eyes were shining with fear. His skin looked jaundiced.

"I don't know," he mumbled.

The gun in Jess' hand roared.

Bud Polk was twitched half around. He screamed like a girl, grabbed his upper left arm with his right hand. Blood began to ooze between his fingers.

Senorita Scorpion gasped.

"Who burned the 10X?" Jess repeated.



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"Dodge. He got most of 'em."

"Go on, talk—damn you!"

"I'm talking. We only followed orders. We got a cut, but that was all. Rafflock was stealing the Coronado Cattle Company blind, stocking his place down in the Swisshelms."

"All right," said Jess. "You can fill in the details for the sheriff." He turned to Senorita Scorpion. "Hold the gun on him while I tie him up."

THE FIRE had burned low. Jess threw on a log. The flames lit up the figure of old Tom where he was sleeping a few yards off. Aside from the wound in the fleshy part of his leg and a creased scalp, he was all right.

Bud Polk was rolled up in his blankets, but whether he was asleep or not it was impossible to say.

Jess yawned, stubbed out his cigarette. "Better turn in," he told the girl. "We got a busy day tomorrow, getting 'em down to the Rafter H."

"You—you're not taking Senor Hunter to Tombstone?"

"No. Nor Bud Polk, neither. I figger the sheriff ought to be at the Rafter H by tomorrow. I sent Pink Ferguson after him and left a plain trail in." He grinned ruefully. "That's how Rafflock found me so quick."

"The sheriff!" The Scorpion rose swiftly to her feet. "Jess." She gave his name the English pronunciation. "I—I am going back to *Mejico*—tonight!"

"Not with my money belt, you ain't."

"The belt! I—I'd forgotten."

He could see her throat begin to get red again. She slipped it off, held it out.

Jess took out the bills, counted them deliberately. "Dern my hide," he said, "if this stuff don't grow a little every time I get it back."

There was now almost ten thousand dollars in the belt. The Scorpion was rigid as he buckled it about his waist. He grinned at her. "Why don't you take off that hood?"

He heard her gasp. "I—I'd die of shame."

"You can't hide your face all your life!" His grin broadened. "Not from your husband!"

The girl shrank away from him. "You—me?"

"That's right. You and me." Before she could guess his intention, his long arm had whipped out, yanked the hood from her head.

Meg Hunter's yellow hair spilled down about her shoulders. She stared at Jess out of wide gray eyes, her face hot with embarrassment. Then she hid her head on his shoulder.

"You knew!"

"Yes," he said, "I knew. What happened to the real Senorita Scorpion?"

"She's dead, Jess. I found her on the trail like Pap said, but she was dead. She'd—she'd bled to death, I think." The girl shivered in his arms. "I—I was crazy-mad. I was going to kill Rafflock for what he'd done to us, to Pap and to that girl too."

"I dressed in El Escorpion's clothes and rode with the Ash boys to rescue Pap. That night at Cottonwood Hole when I stuck the gun in your ribs, I thought you were Rafflock. I saw my mistake in the nick of time. And then I didn't get another chance."

She lifted her head. "I—I was so afraid of what you'd think of me if you found out. Jess, did you mean that? What you said about you and me?"

There wasn't but one answer to that and Jess made it—satisfactorily.

A log burned through, sent up a pillar of sparks. Meg pushed against his chest, looked up at him anxiously.

"Jess, that—that money. Two hundred dollars of it are mine. I put it there——"

"Don't give it another thought," he said. "I'll buy you a dress out of it. A green silk dress."



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The driest smoking pipe I ever puffed on. Imported Briar bowl can be detached from all-briar shank. Finished in gleaming walnut color, waxed and polished. Gravity flow easily eliminated by removing bone plug in bottom of shank 6 3/4" high. A stand-out in any collection.

6 3/4" in. high

Hard Rubber Stem

Briar Shank

Imported Briar Bowl

Saliva Trap

Removable Bottom

6 3/4" in high

TYROLEAN

**\$295**  
EA.

LIMITED QUANTITY—  
ORDER NOW!

**SEND NO MONEY**

## FREE ROLL-UP POUCH

This handy pouch holds pipe and tobacco. Made to sell for \$1.00 — it's yours free with every order of \$5.00 or more.



### MARK FOSTER

Foster Products, Inc., Dept. WFM  
179 Wooster St., New York 12, N. Y.

Please send the items checked below. On arrival I will pay postman prices indicated plus small postage and C. O. D. charge. If not completely satisfied with my purchase, I may return it within 5 days, unsmoked for full purchase price refund. Please send "ROLL-UP POUCH" absolutely free if my purchase is \$5.00 or more.

- ... "Tyrols" at \$2.95
- ... "E-Z KLEENS" at \$1.69 (2 for \$2.98)
- ... "Churchwardens" at \$2.98
- ... "Weichsels" at \$2.95
- ... "Huntsman" at \$2.95
- ... Pot-Luck Slot Machines at \$2.98
- ... "Dippers" at \$3.69

Name.....

Address.....

City.....Zone.....State.....

☐ Check here if you enclose full payment now. We pay postage and C.O.D. charges. Same free gift and refund offer.

**Y**OUR dollar buys twice as much at these amazingly low prices! Every pipe guaranteed to add distinction to your collection. Every pipe guaranteed to be the coolest, sweetest-smoking briar you ever owned —OR YOUR MONEY BACK!

## Cool to Smoke — Easy to Clean

### E-Z KLEEN Air Cooled Aluminum Pipe

You've seen metal pipes like these priced \$5.00 and even higher! My special price of \$1.69 each, TWO for \$2.98, makes this pipe an amazing "buy"! Gleaming lightweight aluminum shank air-conditions the smoke. Special filter traps "goo" and tars. A piece of paper or cotton cleans this distinctive pipe in seconds!

**\$1.69**  
EA.  
2 for \$2.98



## Two Pipes In One! TWO-STEM "CHURCHWARDEN"

You really get two pipes for the price of one! Both stems fit the same bowl—use the short one for outdoors, and relax with the long one at home.

Genuine aged imported flair-grained briar. Shank reinforced with large size genuine sterling silver band. Complete with two stems—lengths 11 in. and 6 in.

**\$298**  
EA.



## Unique Imported Czech Pipe! WEICHSEL

You can now enjoy the zesty tang of the traditional Bohemian peasant pipe. Made by old-world craftsmen. Genuine briar bowl, fragrant cherry stem, rust-proof ferrules and bowl lid, moisture trap in socket, genuine horn bit, and gaily beaded tassel.

**\$295**  
EA.



## A Collector's Gem! HUNTSMAN

Another unusual Bohemian pipe I imported direct from Czechoslovakia. For a new smoking thrill, add this rare and beautiful old-world pipe to your collection.

Genuine briar bowl packs a heap of cool, sweet smoking. Has hinged lid for draft control. Length 6 1/4 inches. Removable bottom for easy cleaning.

**\$295**  
EA.



## Amazing Fun! POT-LUCK Slot Machine

Just press the lever and watch the regulation cherries, bells, lemons, plums go 'round, just like the "real thing"! And what a thrill to hit the jackpot! Ideal for parties. Made of durable steel, handsomely designed. Complete with chips and instructions. Portable and inexpensive!



**\$298**  
EA.

## "DIPPER"—The Sensation of the Season! Sold for as much as \$12.50



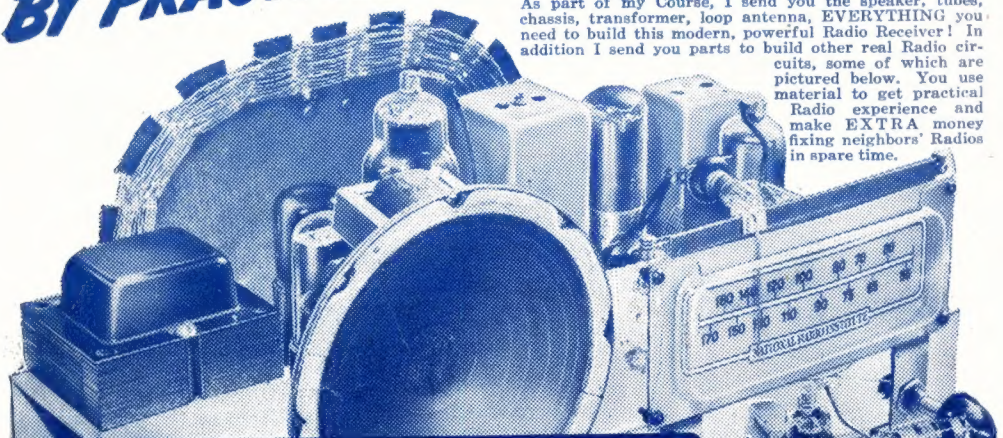
**\$369**  
EA.

These are rare "limited edition" pipes, for only the most perfect aged briar can be used. 3/4" thick bowl cools the smoke. Pipe length 5 1/2". Bowl Ht. 1 1/4". Bowl Diam. 2 1/4". Wt. 2 1/2 oz.



# LEARN RADIO

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☐ Check if Veteran